

Cristin Espinoza

Public Policy Internship Final

June 2nd, 2017

Colorado Charter School Institute

The Colorado Charter School Institute is the only school authorizer that does not belong to a district. There are currently 39 schools that have been authorized through CSI, some of which I was able to watch go through the authorization process, others that I had the opportunity to check in on at various points. This organization is the backbone of many charter schools in Colorado and the experience I was afforded through this internship was immeasurable.

Section 1. Learning Experience

It would be impossible to sum up all of the valuable insight that interning for the Colorado Charter School Institute has given me. I knew little to nothing about charter schools before this internship and was quite a skeptic of them. Prior to this experience, were I asked what a charter school was, all I would have been able to say is that they are privately run, publicly funded schools. What I would have failed to say, is that these schools give parents an opportunity to make decisions they believe to be best for their children because charter schools are generally specialized in certain areas. My favorite example of this is a school in Downtown Denver that I have since fallen in love with- University Prep. They are a K-5 school that has created an emphasis on their students being college bound. When CSI went to check in on them, I was able to tag along and watch their Friday morning precede. Each class was themed to the alma mater of each teacher and there were small assemblies that gave each classroom the chance to show pride for their teacher's university. Because University Prep serves an extremely low-income, high need area, the likelihood of even half of these students going to college would generally be low, according to most statistics. This school is well on its way to instilling the innate focus in each of their students that I have not seen in a school ever before. What was even more fascinating, was that despite University Prep being one of the poorest schools in the Denver Public School district, yet one of the highest performing. This was a theme in most of the school's I was able to visit. These charter schools are driven to being high functioning, successful schools, and CSI is a huge part of that.

Cristin Espinoza

Public Policy Internship Final

June 2nd, 2017

Beyond the charter school system from the inside, I learned many of the players that work together to make schools, charter schools specifically, work. The CSI staff was not large by any means, but each member of the team had a highly-specialized job- I worked under the Director of Legal and Policy Initiatives, for example. All members of the CSI team banded together to form an immensely cohesive team that always had the goal of ensuring success in each of their schools at the forefront. That was most obvious in the board meetings for potential schools. Each of the board members really took a comprehensive interest in all the details, however small, of each charter school application. It was such an impactful learning opportunity to watch them examine the pros and cons of schools, some of which I never would have thought to be an issue, or benefit. I learned so much about all the factors that play into schools opening and am so glad I had the opportunity to review these applications with CSI.

The bulk of my time was spent on research projects meant to get me up to speed with all the meetings and school visits I was encouraged to attend. Because of this, I learned a lot about content I likely never would have without the numerous projects assigned to me. One such project dealt with the issue of website accessibility, or lack thereof, for users with disabilities as defined in the Americans with Disabilities Act. I have attached that project to the end of this paper. I had never heard of website compliance issues before, but I became quickly up to speed with all the issues- which were immense and in depth- very quickly. I had a lot of fun learning about public school system issues that I had no idea existed and was pleasantly surprised to see CSI working frivolously to combat them with sound solutions.

Section 2. DU Course Prep

In terms of research skills, I believe that public policy courses I have taken helped prepare me for this internship. A lot of the public policy courses offered at the University of Denver place a significant emphasis on writing papers- most of which require an immense amount of outside research and reading. Fortunately, so too was my internship experience at the Colorado Charter School Institute. I was able to use many of the skills I already had to be successful in my internship and believe it helped me to represent

Cristin Espinoza

Public Policy Internship Final

June 2nd, 2017

this university as well as I could. On the other hand, I don't think the content of the public policy courses assisted me much for this internship. We do not learn much education policy through our PPOL classes, though I wish we did. Most of the knowledge I was able to utilize in this internship came through personal drive to learn more about the education system and the way it works in the political sphere.

Section 3. Career Impact

This internship was the true domino effect for me. Freshman year I started an internship at the Colorado State Capitol. Not having much of a preference for committees, I got randomly placed with the chair of education committee and, as they say, "the rest was history". I became so enthralled with all things education policy and was completely hooked. The following year I got my feet wet in other areas of the education system by volunteer teaching through a DU organization (Writ Engagement Corps) as well as through Junior Achievement. Every experience increased my interest and passion in the education system. Being interested in education policy at DU is difficult because there are not a lot of options for those of us that are so entranced by this sector, which is why I was so quick to jump on this opportunity when Debbie emailed it to us. CSI has made such an impact on me as there are so many ways and resources to dive deeper. While doing this internship I was applying for Teach For America- which was highly encouraged by my supervisor because a lot of schools authorized by CSI hire TFA core members (such as the University Prep school I mentioned earlier). In essence, this internship has had a profound impact on me and absolutely solidified my choice to stay within the education sector.

Section 4. Skills Gained/Utilized

I believe I significantly developed my writing skills through this internship with CSI. My supervisor and I related heavily on the issue of always saying "too much". Professor Fusfeld has told me numerous times that I write with too much "fluff"- which has significantly improved since his freshman seminar my first year. After my first project, she taught me the IRAC analysis, something that she has become attached to since learning it in law school. It was a skill I gained that I otherwise maybe would

Cristin Espinoza

Public Policy Internship Final

June 2nd, 2017

not have because it was a way of writing I had never heard before. The acronym stands for Issue, Rule, Analysis, Conclusion. While seemingly basic, I was surprised at how much more efficient my writing became when I started using that form of summary. The IRAC analysis ensured that I kept everything clear, concise, and to the point and is one that I will likely continue to use in the future.

I did not realize this until my final meeting with my supervisor, but my ability to prioritize was a skill I had and utilized well during my time at CSI. She pointed out that she was really impressed by my ability to always know what to put first as well as my adherence to deadlines. I have always prided myself on being as organized as possible and believe that this skill really shined through over the course of my internship. It was hard at times trying to balance CSI with school, work, and extracurricular activities, but I am thrilled to know that my dedication to CSI did not go unnoticed.

Working for the Colorado Charter School Institute afforded me the opportunity to expand on skills that I already had as well as develop those which needed developing. I am forever grateful for CSI for pulling the best qualities out of me without trying. This internship was an opportunity that reflected positively on me in the short term, and will continue to do so in the long run and I know that I will find myself referencing this experience for years to come.

Section 5. Recommendation

I would absolutely recommend this internship to anyone interested in learning more about the Colorado education system through the charter school lens. It was unlike any other internship I have ever had. I was not the stereotypical intern you see on coffee runs or taking notes at a meeting. Trish Krajniak, my supervisor and DU alumna, always paid attention to what I was interested in and made a point to have me taking on big tasks independently. One of my perhaps most satisfying tasks was the last one I completed. For the last few weeks I was working on a project that dealt with charter school websites. Because charter schools are still required to abide by state and federal laws, although privately run, they were subject to violating the American's with Disabilities Act in terms of website compliance. I had never

Cristin Espinoza

Public Policy Internship Final

June 2nd, 2017

heard of this before, but it dealt with the issues of websites not being entirely accessible to all those who use them- paying special attention to those with disabilities. It was one of the more difficult research tasks I did because I had zero background knowledge on the subject. The overall goal was to produce a notice to all the charter schools that CSI authorizes, which should be coming out this summer. I have attached the initial work to the end of this paper- it was some of the background research I completed before writing the actual notice.

Overall, I could not have had a better experience with the Colorado Charter School Institute. My only critique is that I wish it would have been longer so I could have gained more experience. I am thrilled I was able to be a part of this team for the last two quarters. The entire CSI staff made me feel welcome from start to finish and truly considered me a part of the team- they always ensured that I was included in emails and thoroughly explained information when I was unsure or unfamiliar with the topics of discussion. One aspect of this organization that was a first experience for me was the resource CSI has offered up for my future endeavors- both educationally and professionally. In the Fall, I am starting an independent research project with one of the public policy professors- centered on education policy. Trish has expressed interest in being involved in this process as it goes on and plans on being a resource for my research. While the experience has come to a close, I am comforted in knowing it will not be completely ending my relationship with Trish or CSI as a whole. As I was CSI's first intern, I hope that this is a great foot in the door and the University of Denver, especially its public policy department, can become increasingly involved with education policy for its undergraduate students in the future.

PROJECT MEMO #3- discussed on page 2

TO: Trish

FROM: Cristin

RE: Advisory Bulletin on Website Accessibility

DATE: March 28, 2017

Website Accessibility

Issue: Website accessibility issues and compliance regulations

June 2nd, 2017

1. When looking at the legal basis for this requirement it would make sense to reference the Americans with Disabilities Act. There have been a plethora of cases in recent years, in both the education sector and in general, surrounding this issue of a lack of accessibility for persons with disabilities- with specific reference to hearing and vision impaired disabilities.
 - a. The Department of Justice primarily enforces this act and as such has laid forth its intent to improve upon the act as new issues, such as this one, arise. Title III of the ADA “prohibits discrimination on basis of disability in places of public accommodation”. Until recently, it was more geared towards wheelchair accessibility and things of the like. It has since began to cover digital issues.
 - i. There is an emphasis on website compatibility for effective communication for persons hard of hearing as well as accommodations for persons who are vision impaired.
 - b. Essentially, if websites are not compliant and accessible to those impaired via disability, like vision or hearing, it violates provisions set forth in the ADA.
 - c. As early as 2010, when website compliance issues began to rise, the Department of Justice made initial statements about how they want to move forward in the future to solve these issues- with specific reference to ensure website accessibility for those with disabilities.
 - i. The proposed amendments to expand the language and amend the ADA to be explicitly inclusive of website accessibility are still ongoing and expected in 2018.
2. Many websites that reference their own compliance follow the guidelines set forth in the [Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0](#). These guidelines have been endorsed by the DOJ and are set on the basis of three principles: Perceivable, Operable, and Understandable.
 - a. Each of these principles also includes additional subsets that outline the types of requirements to be met. They also include definitions of what each would mean to be compliant to the guidelines.
 - b. Based upon these guidelines, websites are assigned a score (A, AA, AAA), with A being the minimum standard of compliance.
 - c. Many of the remedies set forth in the settlements reference a commitment to ensure accessibility, or hiring auditors to do the website cleanup- these solutions tie perfectly in to becoming WCAG 2.0 compliant. It is a sound basis, supported by the DOJ, that is a step in the right direction for making websites more accessibility for persons with disabilities.
3. Perhaps the biggest issue surrounding affordability is in the fact that students with disabilities may not always have the tools they need to access the internet. This was a much larger issue in the past versus the present but if online tools are being offered to students with disabilities, they should be compliant.
 - a. In terms of implementation, there are a lot of affordable options for achieving website accessibility that is WCAG 2.0 compliant.
 - i. Drupal and Joomla offer accessibility support, as does Moodle.
 1. They are all free programs for basic levels of support.

June 2nd, 2017

- b. Extra cost, to some degree, is really in regards to the time spent- not necessarily the money. There are some cost effective ways to go about making websites compliant, someone just has to take the liberty of doing it, which can be time consuming.
 - i. Additional costs that are of most relevance are in relation to captioning videos (i.e. audio describing videos, live captioning, etc.)
 - ii. Luckily, it is not necessarily needed if these kinds of things are already not present on websites.
 - 1. Amara is a free online captioning tool for basic levels of support.
- c. Remember, there are three levels of being WCAG 2.0 compliant. While A and AA are much more affordable, level AAA comes at a much higher cost. It may be a better solution to express and encourage website requirements to meet level A and/or AA standards.
- d. In general, some issues may be simple and just in need of tweaking.
- e. Outside of the web, there can be issues of document accessibility. Microsoft Office has made some effort to help users make documents more accessible by implementing [accessibility checkers](#) to some versions of Microsoft Office. This is a free tool that many don't know exists, but it could be extremely helpful and relatively simple.
 - i. This extends to Word, PowerPoint, Excel, etc.
- 4. There are many websites to test for compliance that range depending on what areas of compliance people are looking for. This website lists a bunch of different tools to test for compliance: <http://www.w3.org/WAI/ER/tools>