Internship Report

From May until July 2015, I both assisted and collaborated with Professor Serkan Karadas, a distinguished Sewanee economics professor. His areas of interest and research mainly center on the intersection of finance and government-related topics. Thanks to the munificence of the University, I received the funding that made my work with Professor Karadas possible. Professor Karadas’ efforts this summer focused on doing the “legwork” required to compose an academic paper examining the relationship between corporate PAC (Political Action Committee) spending and corporations’ receipt of government procurement contracts. The idea was to look for any statistical correlations that suggested tacit extortion of politicians or corporations for political and/or corporate favors.

Since the paper is a nascent state, most of the work consisted of prerequisite, data-based tasks. Effectively, this meant that most of my time was spent on my own, sorting through databases, reviewing and correcting any oversights in the computer program’s matching of company names. However, there were other less monotonous tasks that were more thought-intensive. Chief among these tasks was a review of the existing academic literature in related subjects (this is a standard academic practice). Of all my tasks, the most creative was coming up with suggestions for specific questions and variables to be tested in the paper. Overall, my time was devoted to cleaning the vast datasets that Professor Karadas provided for me. The data sorting/cleaning was of chief importance because the results gleaned have valuable potential for use in multiple future research papers, not just the one we were working on immediately.
With respect to the academic literature review, I undertook large internet searches that focused on papers studying the relationship between government-awarded contracts and political campaign spending. The literature review is a critical part of the research process because it guides the focus and aim of a paper. When one effectively understands the existing literature on a topic, it allows him to hone his research questions to be targeted, relevant to existing research, and non-redundant. An effective literature review prevents a paper from being too egregious in its conclusions while making sure its findings offer a fresh perspective. The review also allows the authors to showcase their knowledgeability of the area of study in the paper’s introduction and abstract, thereby lending credibility to the paper and its findings. Throughout the literature review, I learned how to effectively use Google Scholar to begin filtering through papers with tangential relations to our subject area. From my firsthand experience with Google Scholar, I learned how to use more specialized databases, such as the Social Science Research Network (SSRN) to measure and map the “universe” of academic literature on a specific topic.

My working conditions were fair and comfortable, though they provided their own set of challenges. With the exception of weekly and sometimes bi-weekly meetings with Professor Karadas, I worked at my own leisure. The timing of my work hours was flexible, though I was obligated to honestly and dutifully record my work hours and I had agreed to work an amount of time that averaged eight hours a day. Depending on factors such as my sleep requirements, personal preferences, and roommate accommodations I would sometimes work sporadically at night, on the weekends, or at odd intervals of the day. Since all my work was done on my
personal laptop, I did not require any particular location to perform the work. However, it soon became clear that certain places were more ideal than others. For anyone who takes on a research internship position similar to mine, I recommend finding a work environment that fosters a productive, focused, and minimally stressful personal experience. In my own case, I found that rotating between a number of different spaces every few days worked best for me.

This summer research assistantship proved to be a valuable exercise in self-directed work. I learned that research in an academic setting can be tedious and oftentimes dull, but such work is necessary to build a credible body of research that comes up with new answers and dynamic solutions to pressing problems that affect both academia and the greater world. Outside of the actual subject matter, I developed strategies to improve my own personal performance in an autonomous work environment. Through my pitfalls and successes, I learned how I can effectively work with little or no guidance from supervisors. Self-guided work is a skill that demands a delicate balance between a flexible thinking and hard-nosed discipline. Overall, the internship gave me a good grasp of research work in academia and a good pulse on my own work and thinking habits. I will use the experience from this internship to improve the way I plan and achieve my own goals.