



Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance

Placement Description

The mission of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance is to work in partnership with city government and the community to develop a comprehensive vision and master plan to revitalize downtown Harrisonburg into a prosperous and vibrant city center.

Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance is now in its second year of operation and has achieved many successes, including the designation of downtown Harrisonburg as a Virginia Main Street Community and as a federal and state Historic District

The placement site has four areas of focus:

1. Promotion-- Improve the image and usage of downtown through communication and public relations strategies. Examples include publishing a quarterly Daily News-Record insert offering monthly special events downtown (such as the Valley 4th Parade, Fridays on the Square, Holidays on Main Street, etc.).
2. Design--Work with businesses, property owners and city officials to enhance the physical appearance of downtown through efforts such as streetscape improvements and upgrading the facades of buildings
3. Economic Development--Strengthen existing businesses and recruit new businesses for vacant spaces. Examples of special projects include maintaining a website listing available properties, promoting downtown housing, and expanding the Downtown Harrisonburg Farmers' Market
4. Organization--Communicate with the public about Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance's plans and accomplishments and fundraise for the organization through an annual membership drive (Annual Celebration & Reception) and fundraising event (Renaissance Night)

In addition to the site's four main focal areas, field placement students will be expected to assist in a fifth area of focus: Administration--Oversee committee work, collect data, prepare reports, and undertake special projects.

Contact Information

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Read about students' experiences at this site:



Conor Kiely

From the first week I was working with HDR, I bought into their mission of revitalizing downtown Harrisonburg into a vibrant and prosperous city center. HDR serves all businesses, organizations, citizens, and other visitors who inhabit the downtown area. HDR works to build relationships with all of these constituents in order to strengthen the community as a whole. Specifically, HDR organizes events for both businesses and citizens of the downtown to participate in, promotes downtown restaurants and retail shops, and strives to improve the physical appearance in order to improve the downtown experience for the general public. My time spent with Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance (HDR) has been productive and worthwhile, and I value the knowledge and experiences I've gained. The great part about my internship experience was the varied opportunities that were available for me. For the early stages of the internship, I was learning about how a non-profit functions. My supervisor provided me with a brief background on what each staff member's individual responsibilities were, while also explaining the team aspect to the office. Each staff member has a specific concentration such as promotions or special events, but the key to this successful non-profit is the mutual interests and willingness to help that the staff shows in each other's work.

As a part of learning about the functioning of a non-profit, I was also able to learn how to perform administrative tasks in the office. These tasks consisted of gathering membership information, entering it into a database, and updating donation histories for each member. I also used this information when writing letters to donors. I had the opportunity to edit previous drafts, and also create my own drafts, of membership "thank you" letters. HDR sends these "thank you" letters to new members as well as renewing members after they have donated money, and these letters are extremely important to the success of HDR. Another administrative task that I felt was important to the efficiency of HDR, was my research on non-profit management software programs. HDR does not have a centralized database for every bit on membership information, and this present system can be cumbersome when attempting to enter data into several somewhat disorganized databases. There are several duplicates of member contact info in the present database, which may cause issues when staff needs to contact members. My supervisor provided me with criteria for what type of software HDR was looking for, such as one that has enough memory for 2,000+ members and one that will fit their budget. This task provided me with a heightened sense of the kinds of restrictions a non-profit must consider when spending their budget.

Unfortunately, I was unable to get deeply involved in the planning of any events, but I was able to work on one specific task that may impact the planning of the "Green Tour" of downtown. The HDR "Green Tour" will be a guided group tour of downtown which reveals the many sustainable technologies and initiatives of businesses and organizations. I was able to write up some talking points about HDR's "green" efforts and how we promote the use of sustainable energy. One specific talking point that I elaborated on is tied to HDR's mission to renovate and preserve buildings instead of demolish and rebuild them.



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As the internship progressed towards the middle of the semester, and I became more comfortable with my new downtown surroundings, I had the privilege of building relationships with downtown business owners and managers. By this time, HDR had one major event happening each month. It came time to begin promoting the events, so I was able to take HDR event flyers and drop them off to downtown businesses and organizations. This was the first time I was interacting with businesses in person. I introduced myself, handed them a flyer, and explained some details of the event. Surprisingly, I was able to build rapport with some of the business owners after one short conversation with them. By now, many of the major retail shops know me by name and know a good deal about my background as a JMU student. I continued to visit downtown organizations when I undertook the 2011 Downtown Business Survey. This survey was my large project for the semester. Initially, my job was to trek around the entire downtown district and note every single place of business.

After I spent a week or two collecting the business titles, I met with the executive director about the next step. The overall goal of the survey is to collect contact information such as emails, as well as business statistics such as the number of part-time and full-time employees. This information can eventually serve purposeful when potential businesses want to open up a new shop downtown, and it can also provide HDR with the information it needs about the downtown businesses to apply for a national award. The executive director did not hesitate when he offered me the lead position in administering, collecting, and organizing the contact information and statistics of each business. I was grateful not only to receive complete autonomy on this project, but also to earn the trust of the executive director in accomplishing the task. This project required me to revisit every downtown business and administer the short survey of contact information, which took up most of the time during my five hour days at HDR. However, this was another great opportunity to create relationships with downtown businesses and represent HDR as an organization that wants to spread their services to every business in the downtown district.

Everything that Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance works for and stands for is most definitely advantageous to the community. Without HDR, there would hardly be a sense of “we” in the community, and not to mention the absence of holiday parades, Halloween activities, and the annual Block Party. HDR’s staff works relentlessly to create a more vibrant downtown and the efforts that they provide to doing so is thankless. The only disadvantage of HDR’s services, are that they are not communicated effectively to the ethnically diverse citizens and business owners that make up a large portion of the downtown district. There is no evidence in HDR’s mission that they strive to promote diversity in the downtown area, which is the one limitation of their organization. HDR does not create any multicultural downtown activities or events, not do they have sufficient relations with the diverse downtown businesses. This is something that HDR has a vision of improving and striving to change, but the efforts to reach out to promote diversity will put more stress on an already understaffed organization.

I did not dislike anything in particular about working with HDR, but there were some days that were not as exciting as others. I spent some days folding and stuffing envelopes, or making copies of checks, but these administrative tasks must be done. Every task that I



embarked on was purposeful and essential to HDR and the services that they provide. The most enjoyable part about working with HDR was the multifarious tasks and projects that I was able to complete or offer suggestions on. I loved the team atmosphere in the office and how every staff member could rely on one another for suggestions on their individual job tasks.

I learned numerous skills from some of the tasks I worked on as described earlier, but the most influential and practical aspect of the work I did at HDR was adopting time management and organizational skills. The HDR office is a busy, yet lively and cooperative place. Having to plan events and promotional strategies all while balancing memberships and fundraising can sometimes be hectic. Projects and event planning does not always go smoothly, especially when obstacles arise, so being able to adapt and reorganize on the fly is an important skill. I ran into some barriers while administering and collecting the downtown business surveys which required me to manage my time and reorganize a strategy in a more efficient way. While I did construct a new approach to the survey distribution, I was naively optimistic about my ability to complete the project within the parameters of the semester. I fell short of my goal of completing the data collection and entry. While some of it can be attributed to the lack of cooperation from some downtown businesses and organizations, I also should have planned accordingly and allocated my time more wisely than I did. These two skills are exemplified in the HDR office and are skills I learned to value at a higher degree while working with HDR. As an Human Resources professional, time management and organizational skills are obviously imperative to accomplishing tasks. These two skills are also very important to have as an undergraduate and graduate student; however, I now have a newfound understanding of the implications in the work world. If the HDR staff or a Human Resources department staff fails to plan and manage their work and task schedules, their entire organization could suffer. Careful planning and organizing of my tasks is something that I will continue to work on and hopefully perfect at some point.

One last HR-specific skill that I was exposed to at HDR was the selection process. This process included job analyses, job descriptions, and interviewing. During my final week at HDR, I was fortunate enough to accompany the other staff into a couple interviews of future potential HDR interns to take over my position. I was *thrilled* when my supervisor asked me if I would like to sit in on the interview. I prepared for the interview by reviewing the job description and analyzing how closely it resembled tasks that I actually did on the job. The job description was perfect, so my next step was to review the two applicants' resumes and highlight any information that stood out to me as being an asset to HDR. I highlighted certain lines anytime the applicants listed a skill or experience they had that I thought matched the job description or specifications. I was not instructed to carry out these preparations; I was just trying to think like an HR Recruiting and Staffing manager. I did not say much during the interview, but I was asked by the applicants why I got involved with HDR and what my everyday tasks were. I explained my enthusiasm for downtown Harrisonburg and small businesses everywhere, and then I tried to condense a whole semester's work into a minute-long verbal description. I thoroughly enjoyed analyzing resumes and looking for parallels between the applicants' skills and the HDR intern criteria.