

Riya Mohan Margolis Internship Reflection Blog

Despite all of the invaluable lessons that I've gained throughout my summer with the Margolis Center, my most memorable moment will always be when a Director of Research introduced themselves as an amateur ventriloquist. It was at this time that I realized that the center was not only a hub of innovators but also a community of rare individuals. With this unique blend of perspectives, the center sits at the intersection of numerous disciplines, such as equity and technology, and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to partake in such an extraordinary space for health policy innovation.

I joined the Margolis internship with the hope of learning more about my interests in the genetic engineering space. I hope to, one day, focus on understanding the ethical and societal implications of this emerging technology on the medical world. As I continue along my academic career, I hope to learn more about the various factors and stakeholders to consider when this technology becomes more integrated within the medical world in order to inform policy and regulatory decisions. Thankfully, I took my first step on this path through the Margolis internship. My first project, with Dr. Marianne Hamilton-Lopez, directly tied with my career interest because I evaluated the various payment models and existing policies for financing gene therapies as well as identified the possible barriers to access that may exist for stakeholders in this field. My second project was with Patricia Green, and I learned about the considerations of effective communication, planning engaging programming as well as how to use data analysis to evaluate current efforts. Both projects synergized to provide me with both experience in the gene therapy space as well as the skillset to thrive in it, which I am confident will serve me well with my future career.

This summer has been more influential on my career interests and future plans than any class or extracurricular during my semesters at Duke. Before beginning this internship, I could see where I wanted to be with my career but only had a vague notion of how to reach that goal. However, thanks to the guidance of my program advisor, mentors, and the various analysts I worked with, I am leaving the internship not only with an understanding of the type of career I would like to pursue but the steps and tools to evaluate my goals as well. Every aspect of the internship, from connecting with faculty members to attending the journal club, has been vital to influencing my career interests. For instance, by working with a variety of leaders and members of the Margolis Center, I got a snapshot into what their day-to-day routines are like, which helped me evaluate my skillset and interests. Furthermore, the journal club has influenced my future plans by opening my eyes to the extent of health disparities in the medical world as well as within society. I was astonished to learn that geographical barriers created years ago can still have an effect on health outcomes to this day because of the location of hospitals and the allocation of medical resources. Though it was difficult and shocking to learn about and accept the extent of the disparity within the health field, it has galvanized me to strive to take action by deliberately choosing career paths that may allow me to make a difference.

As with the introduction to the health equity world, this learning opportunity has been different to any in-class learning opportunities or extra-curriculars I have completed before. The internship assisted me by giving me the chance to learn by working directly within my field of interest. In classes and extra-curricular engagements, I am able to learn a great deal from readings and theoretical knowledge. However, this is not entirely reflective of the real-world structures and developments within a respective field. For instance, I conducted an extensive literature review for a consortium meeting hosted by the Duke-Margolis Center. As part of my literature review, I

read extensively about the latest developments and issues within the field. With a purely classroom-based education, I would only have had the opportunity to read the literature. However, with the internship, I had the opportunity to take my education one step further by evaluating the impacts and repercussions of my findings to foster discourse between leaders in the field. The discourse I helped influence will, in a cycle, return to affect the next set of literature on this topic. Similarly, when working with Ms. Green and Luke Durocher, I would create documents for use within and outside the center. With a typical classroom education, my writing would go unseen beyond the bounds of the room. However, with the internship, I would receive detailed feedback on how to improve my writing which would precede my writing being sent out for public viewing by the Duke community and beyond. As a result, I not only learned what writing and editing looks like in a real-world setting but made drastic improvements in my writing abilities as well. To further compound my learning, the method of teaching within the Margolis Center is different from any other learning experience I have had because the adage “no question is too stupid” is genuinely upheld within the center. When I first began working, I had a large knowledge gap for the gene therapies project. As a result, I would often make naïve decisions and constantly ask questions. Instead of being annoyed or disappointed, my mentors, Beena Bhuiyan Khan and Becky Ray, were more than happy to correct my work and answer all my questions, no matter how often it happened, which became one of my favorite aspects of the internship.

Another prominent aspect of my internship experience was my opportunity to collaborate with individuals on various career paths, which was further facilitated by the two disparate projects I had the opportunity to work on. Though I was only an intern working for a few months, I was welcomed on the teams and treated as an equal, especially considering the fact that I lacked the same level of knowledge that the other members of the teams possessed. For instance, while

working on presentation materials for the gene therapy consortium, my opinion, perspective, and recommendations on information and approaches were always taken into consideration and included within deliverables. Furthermore, I was also surprised by the amount of work I was trusted with, such as when I created important documents for external use. As part of the gene therapies consortium meeting, I helped create slides and discussion materials for the discussion on topics such as, the current landscape of gene therapies, possible payment challenges, and currently effective payment models. With the communications side of my project, the same level of responsibility was given. I had the opportunity to conduct my own research on the effectiveness of various communication strategies and present my findings to members of the Duke-Margolis Center. As part of the project, I learned how to use Google Analytics to find ties between website interactions and communication efforts. Before starting the internship, I never thought I, as a rising sophomore undergraduate, would have the opportunity to directly present my perspective and review of the gene therapy space to leading gene therapy manufacturers or conduct my own analysis on the center's communication efforts. However, these two opportunities guided my summer and helped me reach up to a new level of work and engagement.

Since the internship helped me to step up to a new role and a greater level of responsibility, I also learned a lot about myself, my ability to work on a team, and effective communication methods. First and foremost, I gained an immense amount of knowledge about considering other perspectives from both research projects. With the gene therapies project, I learned about the importance of viewing topics from other perspectives when creating deliverables for various stakeholders. When creating the presentation materials for the gene therapy consortium meeting, I often had to reframe my research findings in a manner that emphasized the impact that the developments and concerns in the field would have on manufacturers and payers. And, due to the

nature of the health communications project, much of my work asked me to step into the shoes of others in terms of writing style and presentation in order to make information more accessible. Furthermore, I also learned a great deal about myself in terms of my ability to work on two drastically different teams in a work setting. As a student, I only learned how to juggle various classes within a highly structured setting. However, the internship allowed me to understand how to prioritize and plan when working in two disparate but highly collaborative teams. Thanks to the work I completed, I also had the opportunity to improve my academic writing as well as gain research and data skills, such as cross-referencing.

I began the Margolis Internship with preconceived expectations of what I thought my work would look like, but my reality was far better than I could have ever dreamed. Working with Dr. Hamilton-Lopez, Ms. Green, and their respective teams pushed me to grow and adapt to new and cutting-edge settings while also surprising me with how much I was capable of innovating. This summer has energized me to find new ways to innovate in the realm of health policy and my only hope now is that I might get the chance to continue interacting with the Margolis Center after completing the internship as I pave my path to become a future health policy leader.