

Middle Tennessee State University

Practicum Report

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Introduction

In the summer of 2014, I completed the practicum option for the Masters of International Affairs with a concentration in Globalization and International Development. My practicum took place with the Tennessee Department of Economic and Community Development (ECD) in Nashville, Tennessee. This report details my practicum experience.

The following report is broken into sections, each covering a different aspect of my practicum. The first section gives an overview of ECD and the division within ECD in which I conducted my practicum. The second gives a brief description of some of the larger projects I worked on during my time with ECD. In the third section, I provide an evaluation of ECD and the work I did with the department based on my experiences and observations from working in the department. The next section then builds off my evaluation and connects what I have learned through my studies at Middle Tennessee State University with the work I did in my practicum. In the final section, I conclude with a personal evaluation from my experience with ECD.

Organization Overview

It is uncertain as to the year of the department's establishment. After researching the history of ECD and asking those who work in the department, I was unable to find the year when the ECD was established. ECD's mission is to develop strategies which help make Tennessee the number one location in the Southeastern United States for high quality jobs and to integrate Tennessee's economy as a key link in the global economy. (TN Global Plan, 2013) ECD seeks to attract new corporate investment in Tennessee and works with Tennessee businesses and companies to facilitate international expansion and economic growth. ECD is responsible for recruiting business and industry to the state as well as Tennessee's overall economic growth.

(TNECD, 2014) In 2013, Tennessee ranked 14th among the 50 U.S. states in exports and 13th for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). (TN Global Plan, 2013) ECD continues to work towards the goal of improving Tennessee's international economic standing.

In order to accomplish the department's goals of improving Tennessee's economy, the department created the International Division within ECD, which is the division of ECD in which I accomplished my practicum. The International Division was established in 2012 for carrying out ECD's two core functions at the global level; Foreign Direct Investment and International Trade. (TN International Division, 2013) Within these two core functions, the International Division works to recruit FDI and provide programs and services to small- and medium-sized businesses (SMB) to help the businesses trade on an international scale. The stated mission of the International Division is to "ensure that TN businesses are aware of and can readily access the necessary resources to achieve growth and success in foreign markets" (TN International Division, 2013).

Since FDI and Trade are two of the main goals of ECD, they are divided into two subgroups within the International Division. In my practicum, I worked directly with Hayley Hovious, the Trade Director. My practicum focus was mainly on the workings within the Trade subdivision of the International Division. The Trade subdivision works specifically with Tennessee businesses to help them through the steps of taking a local business and expanding it to reach international markets. To assist Tennessee businesses, the Trade subdivision employs three Export Specialists who help connect businesses with resources for a specific region of the world. The three regions are Latin America, mainly Mexico; the European Union (E.U.), based in Germany, but mainly deals with German and U.K. markets; and Asia, mainly exporting to China and Japan. Between 2007 and 2011, Tennessee's top export destinations were Canada, Mexico, China, Japan, U.K.,

and Germany. Since these are the largest exporting markets for Tennessee businesses, the Export Specialists work with businesses that show an interest in a specific region or market and then connect the business with department resources that will help them integrate into international markets. The International Division also employs Export Development Representatives that work directly with the companies to help them export internationally. When a business shows interest in exporting internationally, the Export specialists will meet with the company to discuss options and possible markets for their product, then, the Export Development Representatives will help those companies as necessary to begin the exporting process. (TN Global Plan, 2013)

One of the main programs the International Division created to reach the goals of helping Tennessee businesses trade internationally is TNTrade. TNTrade is ECD's initiative to directly address ECD's goals of increasing the state's exports by providing Tennessee companies with education and business development services that will diminish the risk, cost and uncertainty around entering foreign markets and trading internationally. (TN Global Plan, 2013) The way TNTrade addresses the needs of businesses is through the TNTrade Academy which offers a range of programs designed to provide international business and export training to Tennessee businesses through classes and training sessions. TNTrade Academy works with various state and private groups that can help provide information for businesses covering topics, such as export regulations or market strategies for selling products abroad.

Practicum Activities Overview

Since my degree focus is Globalization and International Development, I worked mainly with Hayley Hovious and Alexandra Payne in the Trade subdivision of the International Division. Hayley was the Trade Director and Alexandra worked directly with Hayley on

programs and projects aimed towards helping Tennessee businesses export and trade internationally. Hayley and Alexandra were in charge of arranging TNTrade Academy plans and classes as well as developing new ideas for classes that would help businesses beyond what was currently offered. They also worked with the Export Specialists to help connect businesses to the resources they needed as well as following-up with businesses after they worked with the department for a while. In addition, Hayley was in charge of arranging business trips that were focused towards improving relations between business executives and Tennessee government officials and businesses and officials in foreign countries. During my practicum, I assisted with numerous projects from helping with surveys to creating briefing materials for the people going on foreign business trips.

I started my practicum on May 20, 2014 and completed my practicum August 13, 2014. Normally, I worked only Monday and Wednesday, but, if there were more projects or assignments that needed done in a week, I'd work Thursdays as well. Due to Federal laws on hiring full-time interns, the department opted to hire me only part-time, meaning I put in about 20 hours a week, instead of the 40 I would if I had been a full-time intern. Since I also held a part-time job outside of my practicum, I usually worked two ten-hour days; I would begin work at 5:30am and finish about 3:30pm. Working ten-hour days proved to be an advantage for me because I could complete most of the projects assigned in only a day's time and would not have to try to come back a second day and pick up where I had left off.

My first day at my practicum was mostly spent attending department meetings and reading information on the International Division. Although I had a general understanding of the goals and mission of ECD, I had very little previous information on how the department went about achieving their goals. Most of what I knew was information from the website; which provides

general information for the public or businesses who are interested in information about ECD. Outside of business meetings, I spent most of my first week trying to learn the process within the department as well as meeting people I would probably work with later. I did not have any specific assignments for that week, since Hayley, my supervisor, was in Columbia on a business trip.

After my first week, I still attended some meetings, but mainly attended meetings of the International Team which consisted primarily of Hayley, Alexandra, and Josh Helton the Assistant Commissioner of International Affairs. I would also go to meetings Hayley held with the Export Specialists when they needed to have update meetings for recent activities with businesses.

Outside of meetings, I mainly worked independently with very little supervision and assistance on the projects I was assigned. One of the biggest projects I worked on was a survey for TNTrade Academy. Basically, any business that worked with ECD and the resources it provides is asked to complete a survey that gathers data on the business growth since starting the process with ECD. The survey is used to gather statistics on the percentage of businesses exporting to specific regions of the world and how much growth their company had experienced as a result of exporting internationally. My job was to prepare an online survey with questions that would gather the necessary information for ECD in order to compile the results. I also had to put together a list of contacts for businesses that needed to complete the survey. Creating a contact list proved to be the most problematic part of the process, since the database that was used for collecting all the business information was highly lacking in necessary contacts because the specific data had not been put in properly. However, after having to cross-reference numerous sources, I was able to compile a fairly complete contact list. When surveys were sent

and completed, I then put together charts and graphs illustrating the information in a PowerPoint that could be used later for research projects, presentations, or as a reference for ECD.

Another big project I worked on for the first few weeks of my practicum was trying to correct the data that had not been put into ECD's database the proper way. ECD had recently begun using CRM (Customer Resource Management), which is a computer program that allows anyone with access to put in company information and information on business dealings with companies so everyone in ECD, no matter what job they have, can access the necessary information on Tennessee businesses working with ECD. However, many people who were supposed to put in data about business meetings and documents completed by the businesses did not put in all the information at the beginning. As a result, of over 200 companies recorded in CRM, less than 10 had contact information for the businesses in the right place. Even those who consistently worked with the companies could rarely use CRM to help them if they needed to contact a specific company. Especially in a large department, like ECD, where there are many divisions and subdivisions, it is important that everyone has access to the same information. Otherwise, the function the department plays is inhibited. So, one of my jobs for the first few weeks was to meet with the people who were supposed to have all the business information and try to clean up the accounts in CRM. Most of the work I did in CRM was because I could not find enough contact information to put together a list of survey contacts, but, after I completed the survey, I continued to work in CRM. When I finished, I had successfully fixed most of the company accounts in CRM and it could then be used as it was supposed to be. It was not perfect, but most of the data was at least put in correctly. After I finished cleaning the accounts, I then put together a detailed instruction sheet to be used within the division on how to put the data in properly for one of the newer aspects of CRM.

The tasks dealing with the surveys and CRM were mainly done at the beginning of my practicum. After I completed those projects, the remainder of my time was spent mostly on research projects. The first research project I did was a PowerPoint presentation on the Sister Cities Programs in Nashville, Chattanooga, and Knoxville. I had to do extensive research on the various programs to put together a presentation outlining the major factors and strengths of the different programs.

During my practicum, I put together a large research project, examining the role of Tennessee in the world economy. I spent a lot of time looking into how Tennessee's economy was integrated into the world economy and the various strengths and weaknesses of Tennessee's economy. I also put together various briefing materials for a couple different business trips people in ECD were taking which included research on hotels and restaurants planned for the trip as well as profiles of the people with whom they planned to meet.

One of the more interesting briefs I put together was on Israel and its cultural, political and economic structures. The trip to Israel was planned to take place in September of 2014 and it was estimated that about 30 delegates would participate in the trip, among them being the Commissioner of ECD, Bill Haggerty, and Governor Haslam. When I finished the brief on Israel, Hayley said they would probably give a copy of the brief to all the delegates and use it as the main summary of all the information everyone needed for the trip.

Organization and Practicum Evaluation

In this section, I will evaluate ECD and my practicum experience, examining both the good things that I learned and experienced as well as the bad things. The work I did with ECD as well as my experiences within the department form the basis for my evaluation. Although there are

some aspects of my practicum that frustrated me at times, it is important to note that I am very glad I had the opportunity to work with ECD and that I learned many valuable lessons through my practicum experience.

When I first began working with ECD, I was uncertain as to what I would encounter for most of my internship. I had anticipated working directly with certain people and being able to work on projects that were important to ECD. However, I had no particular idea as to what that would look like. Of course, holding a Political Science degree, I had a certain depth of knowledge and information about governments and how various governments were structured, but most of my studies had not gone in-depth in how government departments actually work. I had assumed that it would work about like any other office I have worked in. Basically, I had expected to find a system where people communicate with each other to accomplish a project and they keep in constant contact so projects and tasks can be accomplished. I had expected to find a system that was built around teamwork and structured so something one person did added to the overall running of the department.

Even though most of my assumptions were at least somewhat accurate, my practicum with ECD gave me a much clearer idea about how a government organization actually works. Working with ECD also helped me understand more clearly the process that must be taken when working in a department that consists of many people doing individual aspects of a job. Everyone must be able to accomplish their own task, but, at the same time, must be able to work and communicate with others in order to have a successful process to achieve the goals set by the department.

While I was working with ECD, I also had the chance to gain a very real experience of working with a government organization. I saw a very realistic side of how an organization runs

and what to expect when working in a government organization. Since I am looking to work with government organizations or departments after I graduate, working with ECD gave me a very clear understanding of what I should expect in my future career. It helped me understand some of the problems I may face, whether through inefficiency or through communication problems. My practicum gave me an opportunity to learn how to work in situations where teamwork is a must, but not always an easy task.

Another great opportunity I had working at ECD was the ability to observe how a government entity can connect with the needs of a community. Many times in international relations, governments are discussed as if they were one entity. However, even though governments can be viewed as a single actor, it is not possible for the entire government to help every aspect of a community, so it is important for there to be departments or organizations within the government that can help address the needs of communities. ECD is just one facet of the Tennessee government, yet it plays a crucial role in helping businesses in Tennessee export as well as helping bring investment into Tennessee to achieve the overall goal of creating a thriving economy in Tennessee with the goal of benefiting the citizens. Through my practicum, I was able to observe some of the processes of connecting a government entity to the local and community level.

While my practicum gave me many great experiences, there were some aspects of the practicum that frustrated me at times. One of the most frustrating aspects of my practicum that I had to overcome was working with the inefficiency within ECD. Although most of the department ran smoothly and jobs were accomplished as needed, there were times when I found myself in a situation where I had to wait for someone to get back to me with important information, or they had not given me the full assignment which resulted in me having to

continually go back and make alterations to the projects. This was especially evident when cleaning the accounts in CRM; I had to go back three or four times to get all the information necessary to fix the records. Another manifestation of this issue occurred when certain tasks were not thoroughly planned out. As a result, issues that needed fixed were continually found only after a draft was examined. In the case of CRM, they did not even know all the information they wanted fixed at first, so I had to go back through over 200 accounts several times to make some minor adjustments, or, in some cases, fill in sections of missing information.

Although inefficacy was one problem I encountered, it tied in greatly with another issue I had to overcome, which is poor communication. Since many people were in and out of the office every day and would sometimes have meetings come up unexpectedly, everyone told me email was the best way to get in contact with someone. However, emails were also mainly dependent on the recipient being able to respond, which was dependent on them being in the office or having access to emails. Many times, I would send an email with a project I had just completed or ask for some clarification on a project, but it could be days before someone finally got back to me about the project. Most of the time I had several projects to work on, so I could work on something until I received the feedback I needed, but there were times where I would be uncertain if anyone even had seen the email, which would cause me to worry that I was getting behind on a project. However, as I found out by the end of my practicum, poor communication was just accepted as part of the process, so my experience was very similar to what it would have been if I was an actual employee working in the department.

Even though I had to overcome obstacles in my practicum, like inefficiency and poor communication, the obstacles as well as the good experiences all tied together to give me a very practical and accurate picture of how a government organization works and what I can expect in

the future if I pursue a job with the government. The obstacles also helped me evaluate whether or not I would be able to handle the structure of the organization as well as the stress and frustration that came from aspects of the process. With my practicum experience, I now have a better idea of what I can and cannot do in terms of a job in the future.

Theoretical Connections

In my studies at MTSU, one of the main areas of focus I have encountered has been connecting government organizations and programs with communities in a country. Many recent development theories focus on making the connection between the two levels as a way to bring about economic development in underdeveloped countries.

Although ECD works with the Tennessee economy, which is already developed, there are many facets of the process that are foundational to breaching the divide between the two parts of society. For instance, in ECD, the Export Specialists meet directly with small- and medium-sized businesses to discuss products to be exported as well as the export process. Once the Export Specialists have helped businesses identify their products and target markets, they put the business executives in contact with others in the department who can help address their specific needs. By having representatives that work directly with the businesses, the businesses then are more easily able to tap into government resources through the representatives. Once the businesses begin working with the department, ECD can address their specific needs using the contacts and other resources the government has at its disposal.

In development studies, many approaches to development programs focus on having resources flow through the governments of underdeveloped countries so the governments can then use the resources to help communities. The main focus of these development programs is to

pour money into third-world countries through trade and economic aspects or through loans and foreign aid (Thorbecke, 2007). One of the most common approaches is to develop a country using the third-world government as the main agency for utilizing the funds and implementing the programs, as seen in programs like foreign aid and the Millennium Development Goals. The idea for this approach is that most governments are better aware of the country's needs than outside actors and, in many theories, a strong, centralized government is seen as the solution to the problems facing underdeveloped countries (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2010). However, recent studies have presented research to show that the top-down approach to development may be one of the main reasons development policies and strategies have continued to be proven ineffective (Bado, 2012). Recent research has presented several reasons why a top-down approach to development may be ineffective and many of the studies cite the problem that funds and investments given to third-world countries are not necessarily used well or effectively to address issues. Some of these issues can be seen in government corruption, where the funds given to governments are usually used by governing officials for their interests and not necessarily for development programs (Collier, 2007; Harford, 2005; Mayo, 2009). In addition to the issue of corruption, third-world governments do not necessarily have the knowledge or the ability to implement policies that are effective and, many times, flawed policies are largely responsible for slowed growth and inequality in society (Bates, 1988). This, in turn, contributes to the divide between the government and the domestic society. In many cases, the states simply do not have the government structure or capacity to connect government resources to any community projects. There are no processes and no institutions with the capabilities needed to get the funds from the government to those who need it (Bratton, 2007).

In current economic research studies, community-driven development (CDD) has become an alternative approach to development. Many recent studies (Harford, 2005; Sachs, 2005) have found that funds used for development need to be given to the poor in third-world countries. Since a country cannot develop if the poor are unable to even survive, these studies focus on the need for funds to reach individuals and communities before development can be achieved. Using the idea of reaching out and empowering communities, CDDs are becoming a more viable alternative to top-down approaches of previous development programs.

Instead of focusing on the ineffective top-down approach used in the past, CDD focuses on empowering communities so that the community can develop, with the assistance of the government (Bado, 2012; Binswanger-Mkhize, 2010; Sachs, 2005). CDD provides an environment where communities begin the development process, while creating an environment that allows the government to help guide and supervise the programs (Binswanger-Mkhize, 2010). In contrast to a top-down approach, CDD focuses on the need of enabling communities with resources for development, while allowing the government to assist in bringing about long-term development. However, even though this approach is expected to bring about an environment for development, countries still face the main inherent issue in the system, that of the inability of government institutions to connect to the communities in the first place. Being that research on CDD is still a fairly new field, it is still uncertain as to how programs can empower communities in countries. However, through my internship with ECD, I was able to work in a government institution that has successfully overcome this challenge and brought a noticeable increase in the economic development of the state by providing programs that reach down to the community level to stimulate state-wide economic growth.

Working with ECD helped give me an idea of how hard it is to construct a department that can meet the goals of the community. Through watching the ECD work, I gained a better understanding of how a government organization would have to be structured in order to achieve success in development programs. Many times, development programs assume that the governments can just distribute the resources as needed, but it cannot be done without the correct processes and the correct set-up. There have to be people who can talk to the businesses or people developing products, who then have to be able to work effectively with others in order to create a system that is not disjointed. There have to be people at all levels that help connect those in a community to the resources in a government. Without people in a position to help bridge the gap between the state and communities, programs implemented in the state can hardly be expected to bring about significant development when resources allotted for the programs are not even reaching those who need them. Through my practicum, I gained valuable knowledge and understanding in the importance of a well-constructed system that can effectively overcome the divide between the government and the community.

Another important lesson I learned through my practicum, was the importance of gathering information and data correctly the first time. One of the big projects I worked on at ECD was putting together surveys for businesses who have worked with ECD. Through working on the surveys, I learned the necessity of asking the right research questions and gathering the data you are looking for as well as the data that will help with future research projects.

Throughout my studies, especially in classes like Comparative Politics and Research Methods, I have heard that, when collecting data, it is important to make sure it is the right information and the way it is used is proper the first time. However, I did not realize how easy it is to gather the wrong information or to have it put into a system incorrectly. I had always

assumed that, when doing research, you ask the questions that will give you the answers you want. Unfortunately, I learned that is not necessarily the case in the real world.

When I was working on the surveys during my practicum, the first part of the assignment was to go through the survey they had previously conducted and put together a table with all the collected data laid out. After working through about five of the survey responses, I noticed a distinctive trend where almost half of the questions had “N/A” or simply “0” written in the blanks. It was not until I finished all of the responses that I realized only one or two out of all the ones I had gone through had put anything in response to those questions. After talking to Hayley and Alexandra about it, they informed me that the blank spaces had actually been the information they had really been trying to get. Because they had not been able to word their question correctly, the responses had come back as not applicable or nothing. Even though the question itself had been very straight forward, most of the responders had not known the numbers they were looking for and a large part of the surveys were unusable for the research and statistics Hayley and Alexandra had been trying to get. So, for the next survey, we needed to find a way to word the question so the responses would give us the statistics we were trying to get in the first place.

Personal Evaluation and Conclusion

Before working with ECD, most of my work experience had been in assisting with office work and regular office tasks. Although I have worked with the Tennessee Legislature for a few different sessions, working with ECD proved to be a very different kind of work environment. Since I was not working as an office assistant, I had the opportunity to see a very different side

of government operations. My tasks were not simply basic research for meetings or helping file documents correctly.

The majority of tasks I performed were mostly unsupervised and involved more planning and research on my part. Many times, I would be given an assignment like, “Put together a brief on Israel”. I would then have to figure out for myself what a “Brief on Israel” should look like, including what kind of information I would need and what was important for a brief. One of the difficult aspects of my practicum was overcoming the urge to always want specific instructions on a task before I began working. Many times, I felt like I had no idea what I was actually supposed to be doing. I did not know what the projects I was doing were for and I did not know if there was a specific end result I was trying to get. At first, the lack of direction and supervision caused me a lot of problems. I usually felt unsure about what I was doing and would put something together hoping it was right; fortunately, most of the time, it was. Although Alexandra tried to help me if I had problems, she still had her own jobs to complete and I had to learn how to work with the little information I was given in order to complete the tasks with only a little help.

While the situation frequently caused frustration for me, I quickly learned how to take the little knowledge and information I had been given and use the knowledge I have gathered through my studies at MTSU and other work experiences to help me overcome the challenges that I often felt inadequate to take on. At the beginning of my practicum, I did not feel qualified to make the decisions necessary to decide what was important and was not important for travel briefs, especially when the travel briefs would be given to delegates on a business trip to try and improve relations between foreign businesses and Tennessee officials. Nor did I feel confident that I could compile effective survey questions, when the surveys would be used for some time

to come in order to help evaluate the productivity and the effectiveness of ECD programs; after all, I had only a very small background knowledge on how the department ran, so I felt I had no idea where to even start when it came to evaluating the importance of information for my projects. However, when I found myself in a position where I had to make those decisions, I learned to trust myself and not to have to rely solely on the approval of someone else in order to continue a project. By the end of the practicum, even though there were a few things I would have to fix in my projects, most of the information I gathered, and the reports and briefs I put together, were nearly perfect the first time when I finished them. Although it was a source of frustration, the experience helped me become more confident in my ability to make important decisions that could have a large effect on future projects ECD conducted.

Another area that caused me problems at first was becoming used to an environment where communication with others could take days to occur or work was conducted in a fairly ineffective way. When I worked at the Legislative Plaza, all the processes on how bills were filed or how committee briefs were put together were standardized. If someone needed to get in contact with another, it usually took only a half-hour or, at most, a couple of hours, depending on if the other was in a meeting. However, I had not expected the environment I found myself in and it was frustrating at first. I could not understand why it took so long to get responses back or why someone did not just tell me, at the beginning, that all of the information had to be gathered for CRM instead of just telling me pieces of what needed to be put in. In general, I like things to be done in an orderly and efficient manner so work does not need to be repeated. However, ECD had a very different way of approaching the work the department needed and I had to learn to adjust to the different environment. The experience made me reevaluate how I approached issues and made me realize that it was acceptable if someone did not email me back immediately. I also

learned that I cannot just expect that all offices will run the same way; especially when there are completely different processes being used and a completely different setup. Although I knew there would be differences going in, I had not expected how different everything was. However, even that aspect of my practicum helped me learn to accommodate various differences between jobs and helped me learn how to work in an environment that seemed so different to the way I did things. By the end of my practicum, even though inefficiency still frustrated me, I was able to work with the system and work with others the way they were used to working.

Through my practicum with ECD, I learned many valuable lessons that are applicable to my studies at MTSU and to my life after graduation as I pursue my career in the field of International Development. My practicum was not always easy and there were times when I was very frustrated, but the experience was invaluable and helped me in so many ways and causes me to look towards my future. My practicum provided me with valuable hands-on experience in an organization that works directly with many of the issues I have studied in the Masters of International Affairs Program and provided me with many life lessons that I will continue to use as I move forward in my life.

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