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Disability Determination Services and the State of Michigan Media Project

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**THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE
CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS**

Eric Hartstein, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2007, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on April 17, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

Disability Determination Services and the State of Michigan Media Project

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Ronald C. Kramer", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Ronald C. Kramer, Sociology

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Don Miller", written over a horizontal line.

Mr. Don Miller, Internship Mentor

Disability Determination Services and State of Michigan Media Project

For my honors thesis, I wanted to work on a project that would be useful both inside and outside of my academic career. During my senior audit with the Lee Honors College, Mrs. Sue Oole was helpful in suggesting that I create a project in conjunction with my upcoming internship. She proposed that I design a media project, such as a brochure, which would distribute information about my internship's host organization to fellow college students. As my senior year continued, my anticipated internship with the Department of Natural Resources and Environment never came to fruition. However, a new opportunity arose when I was selected for an interview for an internship with Michigan Disability Determination Services (DDS). During the interview, I brought forward the proposal that I had developed with Mrs. Oole. The interviewers agreed that such a project would be both interesting and beneficial.

I was selected as the Spring 2012 intern for DDS. My primary role as an intern was to perform phone interviews to disability claimants regarding either their medical or vocational history. I would then submit reports based on my interviews. In addition to these responsibilities, I was encouraged to use any available resources to work on my honors thesis. DDS was very accommodating in giving me ample time to complete my project in addition to my main responsibilities. Still, devoting time to work on my project was difficult at times given the large volume of work that I was entrusted to complete.

The first step that I took for my project was to gather the necessary information that I wanted to include in my brochure. This required researching printed material available at the DDS office complex, researching online sources, adding relevant information from my own experience as an intern, and corresponding with individuals such as Mrs. Sharon Brady,

Internship Coordinator for the Office of Performance Excellence and Mr. Brian Partie, Senior Internship and Career Consultant for the Civil Service Commission.

The project evolved into a recruiting tool for future interns, rather than a purely informative brochure. My supervisors and I felt that this change would allow my project to become something that could be utilized by DDS in the real world. Furthermore, I agreed during the early stages of the project to create two different brochures instead of one. The first brochure was to be created specifically for DDS, while the second was to be created for the State of Michigan Internship Program as a whole. While this decision expanded the project, it allowed me to use all of the information that I had gathered during my research.

After gathering all of the information that I needed, my next step was to write narratives for each of the brochures. Writing narratives allowed me to lay out all of the information that I wanted to share, and to design how I wanted the information to flow. To develop the narratives I created sections of relevant information that I wanted to include in the brochures, such as *Available Opportunities* and *Benefits of an Internship*. I submitted my draft for the DDS narrative to Mrs. Brady, and my draft for the State of Michigan narrative to Mr. Partie. I then incorporated changes into the narratives based on their feedback.

Once my supervisors and I were satisfied with the narratives, my next step was to design the brochures using Microsoft Publisher. This was by far the most difficult and time consuming step, given its complexity and my lack of familiarity with the program. Designing the brochures required downloading templates and then incorporating the various sections of information into them. I had to familiarize myself with the design and formatting aspects of the program, such as adding and resizing graphics, adding borders and bullet points, changing the

background styling of the templates, creating a professional and uniform appearance, and ensuring that the brochure had a smooth flow.

After creating my first brochure drafts, I submitted them to several individuals within DDS and the State of Michigan, such Mrs. Brady, Mr. Partie, and Mr. Don Miller, DDS manager and thesis committee member, and my thesis Chairman, Dr. Ronald Kramer. Each of these individuals offered feedback, which I then incorporated into revised versions of my brochures. The editing and revision step occurred over a multi-week period, in which I heavily modified each brochure from their original appearance. However, I feel that the projects were improved after each round of revisions, and am very satisfied with the final product.

I thoroughly enjoyed my time working on my honors thesis project. I feel that I was able to take the skills that I developed over my university experience and apply them to something meaningful and lasting. Designing the brochures required the use of traditional research, writing and organizational proficiency, and creative talent. Furthermore, I needed to allocate time efficiently, work under pressure, and multi-task in order to complete my project. These are all skills that I developed during my time as a college student. My hope is that this project will be utilized by my host agencies after I graduate, in order to draw talented students into the program during future semesters.

Disability Determination Services: A Sociological Perspective

The primary purpose of Disability Determination Services is to establish whether or not an individual is disabled, based on their medical and vocational history. The process begins when a claimant files for disability benefits at a Social Security Administration (SSA) field office. DDS receives the case from SSA and then gathers relevant information regarding the claimants age, level of education, vocation experience, and medical condition. After reviewing this information, DDS employees determine if a claimant is able to continue to perform their past work at a substantial level, based on their current medical condition. The claimant is subsequently approved or denied for benefits due to this determination (DHS 2012).

DDS is a federally funded agency, which follows federal policy guidelines. However, federal law delegates the task of determining eligibility for benefits as a state function. As such, DDS operates as a branch of the Michigan Department of Human Services (DHS). This creates a unique relationship, in which DDS employees are regarded as state employees, yet the agency is funded through the federal government. Both the SSA and DHS coordinate their efforts in order to promote efficiency in the determination of benefits eligibility (DHS 2012).

My role as a DDS evidence assistance intern is to perform phone interviews for benefits claimants. DDS employees do not have face-to-face contact with claimants as SSA field office examiners do, and perform all correspondence via phone or mail. I perform an interview on behalf of a case examiner any time that they do not have sufficient medical or vocation information to make an accurate determination. After establishing contact with a claimant, which may take several attempts, I gather the necessary information for the examiner. I then file a report of the information, notify the examiner that the call has been completed, and log

the call. I am able to access the claimant's medical and vocational documentation, which often assists me prior to placing a call.

DHS describes it as its mission to provide resources for, "children, families, and vulnerable adults" to overcome poverty (DHS 2012). Political ideologies have disagreed as to whether or not such a goal is worth the expense. DHS and the SSA are subject to criticism from conservative groups, as right-wing interests have historically opposed the use of public funds to finance social welfare programs. Liberal interests, on the other hand, support the use of public resources as a means to combat poverty and other social problems.

There are two types of Social Security benefits claims. Title II claims provide benefits for those who have remained employed and have paid into the system until the time at which they became disabled. Title XVI benefits, or supplemental security income (SSI), provide financial assistance to those who are disabled and have little or no personal income, regardless of their work history. The purpose of SSI benefits is to combat poverty on a national scale (SSA 2011). Some right-wing ideologies may support Title II benefits as an earned right, while rejecting Title XVI benefits as an expensive public burden that perpetuates government reliance. This viewpoint is illustrated by the "welfare queen" model, which describes recipients of SSI benefits as intentionally abusing a public welfare agency or order to make a profit, while continuing to remain happily unemployed (Blake 2012). Liberal ideologies are able to counter that such benefits offer an important safety net for families or individuals who face poverty due to the circumstances of an unforeseen disability. These opposing viewpoints demonstrate the complexity of political interpretations of public welfare institutions.

When an individual is denied Social Security benefits, they have the right to appeal the decision to an Administrative Law Judge. This can lead to conflicts between the SSA and the judicial system, as determinations for eligibility are overturned. A recent investigation by the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) revealed that the SSA disagreed with one in seven of all determination reversals, but had no means of challenging the court's decision. Administrative Law Judges are able to uphold or reverse decisions independently, and are entrusted to operate without oversight or accountability systems. When a decision is reversed, the SSA must abide by the court. This can lead to a disharmonious relationship between the two government systems (Committee on Ways and Means 2012).

A second conflict arises within the SSA and DDS when examiners suspect claimants are providing fraudulent information. While OIG investigates claims of disabilities frauds, only 25 units operate in 22 states. Some states have been able to allocate resources to this task, but others have been unable to secure the funds to investigate fraudulent actions by disabilities claimants (OIG 2012). Case examiners may become frustrated or discouraged, as they are left with no options to prevent suspected fraud from continuing through the system. Likewise, the public may lose confidence in the agency's ability to function properly if fraudulent activities continue to waste public resources.

I feel that positive changes in the SSA disability benefits process would include holding courts accountable to an oversight committee and providing nationwide resources to effectively combat fraud. These modifications would increase confidence that public funds are being managed properly and that those receiving benefits truly deserve them. In turn, both

conservative and liberal ideologies would better support the role of government in providing welfare for its citizens.

Project Resources:

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Don Miller, Thesis Committee Member, Disability Determination Services

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Sue Oole, Director of Academic Advising, WMU Lee Honors College

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