I spent my summer working with a non-profit organization called Second Harvest Heartland. Second Harvest Heartland is one of the largest food banks in the country. Their storage capacities are large enough that they act as a distributor of food to smaller foodbanks throughout Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. Aside from satisfying the typical duties of a foodbank, Second Harvest’s organization launches a multi-faceted campaign to end hunger in the surrounding community. This community-orientated strategy is focused on working closely with community partner programs to end hunger. Second Harvest provides food for many community partners for things like produce distributions, and sends employees to conduct various types of outreach. My role in Second Harvest took place within one of these community outreach focused divisions. I was a part of the SNAP outreach division. This division’s primary focus revolved around connecting clients with the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, as well as providing information on additional food resources in their community. The SNAP program is the primary nutrition assistance program provided by the government, and many individuals and families who could qualify do not take advantage of the program. The team consisted of several different positions. The folks who worked directly with clients, by assisting them apply for programs, were the SNAP Outreach Specialists. I was a part of the SNAP Outreach Intern team. Our primary duty was to identify potential clients, evaluate their potential eligibility, and refer them to the specialists. We were directed by the SNAP Community Engagement Coordinator. This was my direct supervisor. Her name is Kate Abram, and all the interns worked closely with her throughout the course of the internship.

As the name suggests, most of the work us SNAP Outreach Interns did was outreach related. I conducted my outreach at a variety of community partner sponsored events. These events ranged from community dinners to large scale produce distributions. My outreach consisted of approaching community members and starting conversations about nutritional resources in the community and outlining potential government programs they could be eligible for. I would finish these interactions by recording pertinent contact information. I would then utilize a system called Bridge to Benefits to send their information to our specialists. The specialists would then work in tandem with the client to fill out and meet all the stipulations of the SNAP application through the client’s respective county. I also conducted calls to potential clients in the office from a list compiled by myself and fellow interns. This required working with a database called Oasis. The position allowed for a significant amount of autonomy. Coupled with this autonomy came responsibility. I oversaw setting my schedule. This included choosing which sites to conduct outreach at and directly contacting the site directors, whom I worked closely with. From strategizing how to set up at the sites to passing on information to my superior, working with community partner site directors was crucial to the outreach process.
I experienced my aha moment while I was deep into my internship with Second Harvest. The Badger Reach program is designed for undergraduate students to be able to make a positive impact on their community. It was through pondering this aim, of creating positive impact in my community, that I had my realization. I discovered that to successfully change one’s community in a broad way, individuals lives needed to be meaningfully improved. Thinking about the clients we assisted at Second Harvest helped me conceptualize this notion. As a member of an organization dedicated to eradicating hunger in the community, I was attempting to better the lives of fellow community members. Working in an environment where I was interacting directly with some many different people also yielded a profound realization. I realized that developing relationships is crucial to community enhancement. My internship demonstrated this in two distinct ways. The first of these was through relationships with clients themselves. I realized I could most effectively aid my fellow community members if I built strong relationships with the clients I was directly working with. It was not just with clients that I saw the need to build relationships, but also with our community partners. I observed that our organization could be most effective when we had strong, meaningful relationships with our community partners. The better dialogue we had between organizations, the easier it was to efficiently reach community members. As the scope of Second Harvest’s services extended across the metro area, I had interactions across a diverse set of communities. It was through my experiences in a variety of different communities that I came to understand the importance of place. As I got farther along into the summer, I began noticing certain differences in atmosphere across different sites. I decided that the most effective way of reaching clients was to learn these community differences. The next step was to adjust my style of outreach depending on the site. I saw significant improvements in outreach success rates after implementing this strategy. This solidified the importance of place. Without addressing each unique place with a specific knowledge of that place, one is doomed to be less effective in their work. Finally, while assessing my time with Second Harvest I realized just how interconnected things in our community are. This came primarily from speaking with clients and getting to hear their stories and perspectives. While talking to fellow community members, primarily about issues of food security, I began to see how their experiences were related. I would often hear similar stories and encounter similar preceding circumstances. This reminded me that everything in communities are related. This is especially true when it comes to issues of underprivilege. Reaching a point of needing assistance with food security does not happen in a vacuum. There are failures in access to many resources for the most vulnerable members of the community. To address the specific issue of hunger, a holistic approach is required. Ending hunger is not fully feasible without combatting general inequalities in our communities. I would not have been able to reach this conclusion had it not been for the meaningful dialogue I sustained with many community members.

Throughout my time with Second Harvest, I had many important takeaways. The first, and arguably the most crucial, was that direct application is necessary for meaningful change. My work put me out in the community. I worked with folks to see what Second Harvest could do for them. This direct application of assistance was what made the most meaningful impact on folks in the community. The direct nature of the
work also gave me the most in-depth understanding of the struggles the most underprivileged members of my community face on a day to day basis. Without the direct contact with community members, I would be significantly less aware of the harsh realities that exist in our communities. Continuing with the notion of the importance of directness when it comes to bettering the community, I also observed how crucial direct application was. I utilized direct application when I worked with clients to serve their nutrition related needs. Throughout my time with Second Harvest I built up a significant knowledge of food resources in the community, as well as an acute understanding of several supplemental governmental programs. I directly applied my knowledge of these resources by informing clients of the options they had for much needed assistance.

Second Harvest did an excellent job of working with their interns to make sure they were progressing at a personal level. It was through these aims that I noticed the importance of setting goals. My supervisor met regularly with the members of the team to discuss their experiences with the internship. It was here that I worked through a variety of goal setting strategies. First, I worked on setting Second Harvest related goals. These goals were both short term, such as setting a specific referral target at a site, and more longer term goals like creating connections with a community partner. This goal setting practice extended to personal goals. I worked with my supervisor on setting goals for both the long term and short term future, even though these goals had nothing to do with Second Harvest. This really helped me understand just how helpful it can be to set goals. Merely thinking about and setting your sights on something you want to achieve is an important step to making it a reality. Finally, I realized the value of checking in on these goals regularly. These check ins took the form of setting benchmarks and assessing growth. To set benchmarks, I worked with my supervisors on short term goals that could be quantifiably measured. These were then marked off as they were completed. This was an effective means of tracking my progress on goals. An additional benefit of these benchmarks was that it made it easier to assess my growth throughout my internship. I met with my supervisor to discuss my thoughts on the areas I looked to improve upon and how I felt I had improved. My supervisor also went through how she felt I had developed through my time with Second Harvest. The experiences of working with a supervisor to thoroughly discuss my personal growth was very helpful. It demonstrated to me that to make meaningful personal growth, utilizing goals and measurements of those goals were the most effective means to successfully growing.

Second Harvest has an incredible amount of collaborations with other organization. The idea of ending hunger through community partnerships relies on working with community partners. I personally worked with the site directors from a wide variety of these partners. Second Harvest was also always looking to add new community partners. During an outreach session, I met someone from an interesting organization that focused on providing dental resources to low income community members. I got their contact information and decided to pass it along to my supervisor. She was excited to receive it, and followed up by reaching out to the contact from their organization.
I would recommend that future Badger Reach students keep an open mind when they are beginning their search for their internship. My path to my internship with Second Harvest was hardly straightforward. I started by focusing primarily on law related internships before accepting my position with Second Harvest. It is also important that you make sure you are pursuing an internship with an organization that pursues change in an area you feel strongly about. Although I did not start my search looking at organizations targeting food security, I felt strongly that ending hunger in the community was an important ambition. Therefore, I was thoroughly pleased with my time spent interning this summer. Be ready to immerse yourself in a potentially unfamiliar setting. This can be scary at first, but in the end, you will learn many new things. These experiences will ultimately be beneficial to your personal and professional development.