Marci Monaco-Vavrik

Jeremy Nowak Fellow 2020-2021

My time as the inaugural Jeremy Nowak fellow was a transformative one. When I graduated college, there were a multitude of different paths I could've taken, but I decided to take what felt like a leap of faith on the Nowak fellowship. I had no idea what a Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) was, and as the inaugural fellow would be the first to pilot into the unchartered territory that was the fellowship. Intimidating as it seemed, the Policy Solutions team was very welcoming and supportive as I learned the ropes. Through the relationships and skills I developed and the experiences I gained, the Nowak fellowship helped guide my career path and choice of graduate school degree.

One of the first things I started working on as a fellow was learning SQL and ArcGIS. Learning how to utilize these programs was integral to my experience and provided the foundation upon which I could engage in Policy's work and make increasingly meaningful contributions by cleaning, processing, analyzing, and mapping various datasets. Having these skills allowed me to broaden the projects I worked on and provided deeper opportunities for learning. I utilized both programs for the Barriers to Homeownership project, which was the most significant project I worked on as a fellow.

Barriers to Homeownership was my most meaningful and impactful project for a variety of reasons. The project had qualitative and quantitative aspects, which helped advance my research skills in both areas. I participated in most of the interviews we conducted and analyzed the project and HMDA data, producing many of the figures and tables in the report. I was allowed to take the lead and manage a lot of the project, increasing my experience with project management. It also felt like important work and that the project was directly contributing towards the greater good, helping future homebuyers of color purchase their first home. As a fellow, it also seemed liked a big deal to be working on a project so closely with Ira, the President of Policy Solutions at the time.

Working within Policy Solutions was my first experience conducting research outside of an academic setting. Through my experience working on a variety of research projects and formal and informal conversations with colleagues, managers, and board members, I determined that I wanted to pursue a career in policy research and analysis, utilizing my skills to inform policies and decision making around pressing social issues and inequalities. With a career path in mind, I decided to pursue a Master of Science in Social Policy at the University of Pennsylvania to continue furthering my skills and knowledge in the field.

The Nowak fellowship was a very rewarding experience as it gave me the opportunity to learn new skills and increase my knowledge on various policy topics, and shaped important decisions around my career path and choice of graduate school. This wouldn't have been possible without everyone in the Policy Solutions team who gave their time and expertise to teach me. Their generosity and kindness contributed to a warm and supporting learning environment with an overall sense of camaraderie and team spirit. My time as the Nowak fellow was meaningful and impactful, and I will always be grateful for this opportunity.