



Peter Bearman
Cole Professor of the Social Sciences
Director, Incite @ Columbia University
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March 14, 2023

Subject: Invitation for a summer research opportunity for Ashley Nguyen

Dear Ashley Nguyen,

Please consider this an invitation letter for you to participate at Incite as a Research Assistant from June 1st to August 18th, 2023.

You will work under my supervision on the Letters Project for 35 hours a week. This project aims to analyze a unique digitized archive of about 10,000 letters written to Warren Buffett and his sister, Doris, between 2006 and 2016 from those around the United States, mostly asking for financial assistance.

The letters provide an acute window into both extreme poverty (the kind of poverty of the other America, a horrific grim reality that is often hard to see even within the richest of ethnographic accounts) and relative hardship, the sense that one is not doing well, either relative to one's past, to expectations, to "other" Americans, or closer to home, to family and neighbors. The letters are most often life-stories, narrative accounts of who the letters' authors are, how and why they fell into trouble, and how they think the Buffetts might help put them back on track.

The project examines how those experiencing such lack of control over their own lives anchor themselves with respect to past, present, and future. How have they arrived at where they are? How will they get to where they are going? And how do these elements of their story – how they lack or have lost control and how they hope to (re)gain it – vary across space and time, across the U.S. over the course of this decade? That these letters are written before, during, and after the Great Recession and the passage of the Affordable Care Act provides an opportunity to look at temporal change in the drivers of precariousness, of the subjective experience of uncertainty and lack of control.

Your tasks will include:

- Assisting in the conceptualization and implementation of a research question (or questions) that stem(s) from our overarching research foci. (E.g. “How does the Great Recession impact the stories people tell, and how does this impact vary geographically?”, “By what diffusion processes do people learn about the Buffetts and recognize an opportunity to write?”, “What other kinds of extra-household support do people seek before writing the Buffetts, and when/how do these supports fail, in writer’s accounts?”).
- Assisting with data entry and data cleaning/organization pertaining to the research question. Likely this will include capturing the pertinent features of narrative structure in writers’ accounts of (financial) crises by a combination of reading and hand-coding letters in a sample and natural language processing in R and Python.
- Assisting with analyses of geographic and temporal variation in letters’ stories with respect to the given research question through a combination of close reading and computational text analyses.

This position must take place in-person due to the in-person group meetings and collaboration required for this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Peter Bearman', with a stylized flourish at the end.

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