



CPA Fall award

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Hi Head De La Cruz,

My name is Marcus Russi, and I'm a senior in the college majoring in Computer Science. I only have one semester left at Yale (which I will complete in the spring), but I'm excited to meet you and your family around Branford! Several of my friends who just graduated from Branford College and majored in the biological sciences were ecstatic to witness your appointment on that spring day in the dining hall, too.

This fall I'm doing research and software engineering at the School of Public Health on an HIV/TB epidemiological model while on a Leave of Absence, but I'm living at my house on Dwight St as usual and, of course, staying involved in the Branford and off-campus (we are starting to call it Dwight Street College) community.

I'd like to apply for CPA funding for the fall term, and the project I wish to carry out with the funding stems from my experience commuting, via bicycle, to and from the School of Public Health this summer. This was my first experience as a cyclist-commuter in an urban area, and more specifically my first experience regularly cycling on major roads during the morning and afternoon rush hours.

It was often terrifying and I had a few close calls. Usually they involved motorists passing with way too little room (this happens to be illegal, CT law requires 3' minimum), motorists failing to signal and making right turns in front of me while we both traveled down the roadway at 10-20mph (also illegal, and the cause of my first and only collision with a car in Fall 2016), and motorist intolerance and anger towards my legal occupancy of the centers of left- and right-turn lanes as we approached intersections (often resulting in some combination of reckless driving, horn honking, verbal harassment, etc.).

Through personal reflection, and conversation with other New Haven cyclists, I've centered my thinking on these experiences around two almost inalterable conditions of the urban cyclist: a state of constant helplessness, and a state of baseline fear stemming from the radically different levels of risk taken on by the motorist and the cyclist; all whilst occupying the same roadway. As a cyclist, I have no reliable way of summoning a motorist's attention because bikes don't come with horns that can match the decibel level of a car horn. Not only am I a tiny, lightweight object compared to the 1000kg+ bulk of a steel- and aluminum-clad automobile, I can't easily make a driver even notice me if they're about to do something that could cause injury or fatality to one or both of us (whereas, the first car horn became available in 1910 and shortly thereafter became part of all Ford Motor Vehicle Co. automobiles). Worse, if a car does hit me as I travel down the road, the chance that I will sustain a life-altering or life-ending injury is substantially higher than that of the people in the car: the occupants are shielded by millions of dollars worth of car safety research supporting features such as crumple zones, airbags, and automatic EMS dialers. It chills me to recall a similar discrepancy in risk whereby drunk drivers die less frequently than the occupants of the vehicles they haphazardly slam into.

As a result of my experiences this summer, I felt determined to take action. However, for a while I wasn't sure what I could reasonably do about a problem I feel is at the core of efforts to change urban transit culture towards one which makes cycling as attractive an option as it ought to be. For instance, a few days after almost being taken out by a car while riding down George Street, I bought a marine horn from the West Marine store on Branford. After testing it in a field, I realized that its' 120dB is way too loud to be a reasonable thing to employ on an urban roadway. And, while I intend to shadow at Devil's Gear or College Street Cycles so that I can volunteer at the Bradley Street Bike Co-op later this fall, this work will not directly improve the condition of New Haven cyclists as they engage with the innumerable hazards motorists pose to them on a daily basis. I now believe that the best way for me to respond to my experiences is to create a work of performance art that also happens to function as a mobile public information campaign, and a peaceful, respectful protest.

More specifically I intend to create a piece of mixed media that serves two primary purposes:

1. Educate motorists about Connecticut laws applicable to cyclists, and laws applicable to motorists sharing a roadway with cyclists.
2. Illuminate to motorists (a majority of whom do not regularly cycle in New Haven) what the experience of the urban cyclist can look like, day-in and day-out – both the positives, and the negatives.

My primary design goals are as follows:

1. Create a structure that can be safely towed behind a bicycle or mounted on a rigid-frame backpack which has the ability to serve as a sort of mobile "billboard." Key to the design of this structure is to withstand a light brush with an automobile without threatening the stability of the bicycle.
2. Design the structure to allow the mounting of a small collection of rectangular, but dimension-varying signs on the "billboard."
3. Create signs for the billboard, including but not limited to: a 3-ft-wide plank extending leftwards from the bicycle's center axis to demonstrate the proper amount of space to be allotted while passing a cyclist, a URL to a website summarizing relevant laws and guidelines (with a slogan, for instance "Know our rights, know yours, too:"), statistics about cycling fatalities and injuries, and photographic or pictorial artwork on the experience of the urban cyclist and the cyclist-commuter life.

In support of the creation of this artwork, I intend to:

1. Consult with the owners of Devil's Gear Bike Shop and Bradley Street Bike Co-Op about the design of such a structure, including the potential sourcing of a mount for attaching the structure to the bicycle, if indeed such a structure is best mounted on a bicycle rather than a backpack.
2. Converse with Melanie Zimyeski, Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator for the Connecticut Department of Transportation, and the Connecticut Bicycle & Pedestrian Advisory Board to receive advice on maintaining full compliance with all relevant state law while cycling with the structure.
3. Collaborate with Bike Walk Connecticut and Elm City Cycling, two cycling advocacy groups, to explore any formal support, media coverage, or expansion of the project that could potentially be achieved.

Having created the structure and associated artwork, the performative, public-informative, and peaceful protest aspect of the project will then be on display throughout the downtown New Haven area through my cycling around the city on a daily basis with the structure for a period of thirty days during the Fall semester. For some period of time thereafter, I hope to exhibit the bicycle and structure within the College for public viewing, allowing a space for conversation about the relationship between cyclists and motorists in the New Haven area.

I understand that the deadline for applying for the CPA grant is this Monday, and that undoubtedly you are very busy with beginning-of-term proceedings. Since the guidelines of the grant suggest that the applicant meet with their Head of College, I thought that the above text should provide a sufficient introduction to my proposal, should you be short on time. Is there any period on Thursday, Friday, or Monday where you might be able to meet to discuss my project and my proposal for the CPA award?

All the best,

Marcus Russi