

## Rural Opportunities Institute Scholar Reviews

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Jess Edelson (2022)

The Rural Opportunity Institute is a startup social innovation lab founded by Seth Saeugling and Vichi Jagannathan. ROI strives to support people's healing from adversity by educating the community about trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES), reshaping systemic practices and policies, and connecting people to economic and social opportunities. ROI specifically uses design thinking and systems mapping strategies, acquired from leading design firms in the Bay Area where both Seth & Vichi were trained, to work on projects that bring together sectors across the community- from law enforcement to education, local government to small businesses. All the work that ROI engages with is driven entirely by a community strategy that was pieced together with the help of over 600 Edgecombe County residents over the course of two years. There are quarterly community meetings- one of which takes place at the end of the internship timeline- where representatives from every corner of the county come together to discuss progress and actionable items. As a startup proudly working from the grassroots level and entirely values-driven, one of the greatest aspects of ROI is the fact that it truly works with ALL people in Edgecombe. I certainly emerged from community summer with a broader view of the systems and disparities that are highly interconnected and affect different groups in different ways. ROI has de facto office spaces located throughout Edgecombe County, and does not operate on a traditional 9-5 schedule. On any given day, I could be found meeting with local stakeholders to provide consulting services for their projects, commuting to Rocky Mount to work alongside Seth & Vichi, or finding my own spaces to set up shop and get to work. The hours when community members were available to meet were when I had to be available. My projects ranged from conducting design interviews, analyzing data, providing strategic recommendations, working on a wearable tech program in the local school and county jail, writing investor proposals, and designing and presenting a new business strategy plan for ROI. I also worked closely alongside the CEO of the Area L AHEC and attended data analytics conferences in the Triangle.

If you want to work with some of the brightest people I have ever met, work on projects at the cutting-edge of rural development, and do work that is meaningful and inspiring, consider ROI. At ROI, I was treated and given responsibilities not as an intern, but as a full member of the team. With only three of us, we constantly were dividing and conquering to accomplish our tasks. With no specific office space or schedule, I spent a significant portion of time working on my own, which requires a great deal of discipline and creativity and frankly is not for everybody. I had to find ways to educate myself on the history of the county- specifically the ramifications of the great floods. Given that ROI is a startup and we were doing work never before seen, my bosses didn't always have answers to my questions and I had to be okay with taking a risk and seeing if it would work out. Quick thinking and strategic problem-solving skills were crucial to being able to meet deliverables and deadlines.