As a fortunate recipient of the Neil Isaacs and Frank Wright '50 Fellowship in Investigative Journalism this year, I spent ten summer weeks in New York City, as a research intern at ProPublica. A non-profit investigative journalism newsroom, ProPublica came into being in 2008, and since then has been considered both a necessary provider of public service and unique business model (given that a series of generous foundations keep the organization going each year). Packed into an office just minutes from downtown Manhattan's iconic Wall Street bull are forty plus experienced journalists, editors, and news application developers. I joined four other interns, three of whom focused on reporting, with the remaining intern focused on research.

I found out pretty quickly that ten weeks goes by quickly, and that research responsibilities mean doing much of the digging and interviewing and source-dredging in order for reporters to use in their stories. I contributed research to three stories; the state of financial aid distributions at American universities; the status of ‘special government employees' at various governmental agencies; and the desegregation of school districts across the country (still in the works). Research included fact-checking, cold-calling, archival work, spending days in electronic databases searching for legal documents, and reaching out to independent freelance journalists. Unlike traditional news outlets like the New York Times or the Wall Street Journal, a reporter at ProPublica might have weeks or even months to work on a single story—a luxury virtually unheard of in the field of journalism. And I got familiar pretty quickly with the way effective investigative journalism requires; a level of tenacity and perseverance to continue week after week with the same task, staring at the same spreadsheet.

Regarding the story on desegregating school districts, that was essentially a ten-week project that required me to email and call up the superintendents of hundreds of schools across the country, asking about a court order often opened in the Sixties for the district to fully desegregate. Many superintendents had no idea what I was talking about—a case decades into the making unsurprisingly faded away as time passed—and referred me to lawyers or their associates who may have been old enough to remember that there were such cases. Since my job was to figure out if these court cases were either still open or not, staying organized was crucial: a spreadsheet definitely helps keep track of the progress on each school district (along with all the contact details of miscellaneous contacts). It took me a while to get used to such level of detail, but that's how it is in investigative journalism: the facts are crucial, and a reporter above all needs to get at them.

The tendency to pitch your own stories will be no surprise to anyone who wants a byline of sorts. I went into the internship thinking one level of proactivity was enough, but quickly realized something additional was needed. Broadcasting my interest to other reporters—I was particularly interested in Internet/communications surveillance, since the NSA story was really heating up at the time—didn’t get me onto projects I necessary "wanted," and that's because those reporters simply didn't require additional help. I also pitched a couple ideas, only to have them shot down—it took me a while to then realize that over eighty percent of pitches are rejected, and ProPublica only publishes ideas with high potential for impact. So while frustrated as I returned
to the drawing board many times—and often, that same spreadsheet of mine—it was apparent that successfully pitching stories is a tough skill to develop.

But you have to stay on your toes and pay attention to what other reporters and teams are working on. In mid-August a programmer had an idea to focus on internet censorship—and to start with China, considered as having the most extensive and sophisticated online surveillance regime. Having emerged from Spring Term with hefty coursework on the topic, along with translation skills to offer, I reached out to the programmer and editor in charge of the project, asking to lend a hand. With that, I got a chance to finally contribute to a news application that strongly aligned with my interests—and even write my own accompanying article. All in all, if you wait on the sidelines (and this doesn't go for just ProPublica) as an intern / entry-level candidate and wait for someone to hand you the perfect project, chances are you'll never get anywhere. Furthermore, it takes numerous tries; sounds easy enough, but there is no method more tried and tested than simply showing up again and again presenting your ideas, or demonstrating interest in contributing to a particular project.

I also had the distinct pleasure of meeting Ian Isaacs '77 many times during the summer, updating him on the internship experience. Before I even left campus in the spring, Ian emphasized in our first phone call the importance of networking. "After offsetting rent, the rest of the fellowship money should be devoted to taking reporters, editors, and other interns out to lunch," he said. "Network hard." Those are definitely words of wisdom, both for future fellowship recipients and especially me, a recent grad just making my start in a new city and new job environment. I would certainly advise future fellows to follow Ian's words and make the most out of the people at ProPublica—as well as reaching out to Ian during the summer to get to know one another and exchange ideas.