This summer I worked at Back Forty Beer Company in Gadsden, Alabama. Back Forty, established in 2009, is the largest brewery in the state of Alabama. Last year the company produced over 8,000 barrels of beer, with plans to double that production by next year. A barrel is the industry standard of measurement for beer—a normal keg is one-half a barrel. Although there are over 2,000 craft breweries in the country, Back Forty has created its own niche market within this crowded pool; they make no more than five beers at a time, four yearly brews and one seasonal. They do not try to make crazy beers that will only appeal to craft beer experts, but rather attempt to be attractive to the masses, particularly to drinkers new to craft beer. In an industry synonymous with pretentious people, Back Forty strives to be different. The Back Forty team truly operates much like a family; the CEO, COO, and General Counsel were all good friends during their time at Auburn University. This family atmosphere was one of my favorite parts of the internship at the brewery.

My internship was within the marketing department; however, I was able to work in all facets of the business during my time at the brewery. For example, I was tasked with procurement of new merchandise. I had lots of freedom in ordering new hats and stickers. I was simply told to get it done, and was responsible for dealing with suppliers. In designing new merchandise, I learned quite a bit about graphic design, and also became familiar with Adobe Illustrator. Another role I was assigned was redesigning our editorial calendar, as well as coming up with other new ideas and then implementing
them. These projects ranged from blog posts to YouTube videos, but mostly consisted of social media content. Eventually I was given access to both Back Forty’s Facebook and Instagram accounts. For some time I actually managed the Instagram account, increasing the frequency of our posts.

I also worked closely with the sales team. In that capacity I was allowed access to Back Forty’s Vermont Information Processing account, which is the industry standard for sales software. With this program I was able to generate sales reports on specific regions and accounts, which helped focus the future efforts of the sales team. Additionally, I was able to shadow the sales team in two large markets—Birmingham and Atlanta. For two days during my internship I rode with the sales guys and visited accounts within these two cities. This was a great experience; I got to see the inter-workings of the industry, gaining a greater understanding of how the brewery interacts with the distributors as well as the sales accounts. Additionally, I worked events, including a concert and a restaurant event where Back Forty beer was featured. In both cases I was tasked with approaching individuals and pitching the product, often to those unfamiliar with craft beer. This required me to understand Back Forty’s story and be able to discuss the full range of beers.

One the original reasons I was attracted to Back Forty was my own passion for home brewing. Almost immediately after starting at Back Forty I became good friends with the head brewer. He let me watch him work and explained the entire brewing process and how it differs from beer to beer. One day, when the two brewers and the procurement officer were going out to sample locally roasted coffees for the new fall
seasonal beer—Trade Day Cuban Coffee Stout — I was able to accompany them. We tried five different coffees before finding the right fit. The head brewer allowed me to be very involved in this process, and valued my input. This was one of the highlights of the experience for me.

My greatest take-away from the internship is the difficulty of running a small business, particularly a craft brewery. Back Forty always has more orders than it can physically fill, which creates supply issues. Restaurants and bars often struggle to understand this, as they are used to dealing with the industrial beer giants who can produce millions of gallons of beer. The other great struggle of a craft brewery is that it competes at a macro production sales price, but has the cost of micro scale inputs. Back Forty is priced around the same level as the craft beer giants—Sam Adams, Sierra Nevada, etc. However, Back Forty's inputs are much more expensive per unit of production, making profitability more challenging. I also learned that distributors and sales accounts get a large portion of the profits, so successfully running a brewery is very difficult. I started at Back Forty with the belief that eventually I wanted to start my own beverage company, although not necessarily a brewery. My time at Back Forty allowed me to witness how difficult and capital intensive the industry is. While I now understand that starting one's own company within this field is very hard, I still intend to do so later in life. However, I may wait longer and try to raise significantly more capital than I had previously planned before doing so.

As I am a rising senior, this is my third internship, and Back Forty was significantly more rewarding than either of the previous two. I was given many important
tasks, and had to figure them out on my own. I received great responsibly and freedom, and was genuinely gratified to be treated as an equal, not merely an intern.