From May until July 2016, I both assisted and collaborated with Professor Minh Tam Schlosky, a distinguished Sewanee economics professor, on her ongoing academic research of real estate patterns. Her areas of interest and research mainly center on the intersection of poverty and spatial data-related topics. Thanks to the munificence of the university, I received the funding that made my work with Professor Schlosky possible. Professor Schlosky’s efforts this summer focused on doing the “legwork” required to compose an academic paper examining the relationship between receipts of social welfare benefits and property values on a county and neighborhood level. The idea was to look for any statistical correlations that suggested any sort of relationship.

Since the paper is in a nascent state, most of the work consisted of prerequisite, data-based tasks. Effectively, this meant that most of my time was spent on my own, downloading data from various sources, as well as labeling and organizing academic papers as part of the literature review. However, there were other less monotonous tasks that were more thought-intensive. Chief among these tasks was a review of the actual content in said academic literature. Of all my tasks, the most creative was coming up with suggestions for specific questions and variables to be tested for in the paper. Most of my time was devoted to finding and procuring the data that Professor Schlosky needed in order to perform her spatial analysis. The data search was of chief importance because the results gleaned have valuable potential for use in multiple future research papers, not just the one on which we have been working.
With respect to the procurement of data, I undertook large searches of the U.S Census Bureau's website with a focus on county-level data regarding income mobility and housing figures. Finding the data is a critical part of the research process because without it, there is no basis with which to make conclusive findings. The first step is reviewing the existing literature on a topic; when one effectively understands the existing literature on a topic, it allows him to hone his research questions to be targeted, relevant to existing research, and non-redundant. When one has data regarding the topic of interest, he can begin to contribute new working knowledge and understanding to the field.

My working conditions were fair and comfortable, though they provided their own set of challenges. With the exception of weekly meetings with Professor Schlosky, I worked at my own leisure. The timing of my work hours was flexible, though I was obligated to honestly and dutifully record my work hours and I had agreed to work an amount of time that averaged eight hours a day. Depending on factors such as my sleep requirements, personal preferences, and roommate accommodations, I would sometimes work sporadically at night, on the weekends, or at odd intervals of the day. Since all my work was done on my personal laptop, I didn’t require any particular location to perform the work. However, it soon became clear that certain places were more ideal than others. For anyone who finds him- or herself in a research-internship position similar to mine, I recommend finding a work environment that fosters a productive, focused, and minimally stressful personal experience. In my own case, I found that rotating between a number of different spaces every few days worked best for me.

The summer internship/research position proved to be a valuable exercise in self-directed work. I learned that research in an academic setting can be tedious and often
times dull, but such work is necessary to build a credible body of research that comes up with new answers and dynamic solutions to pressing problems that affect both academia and the greater world. Outside of the actual subject matter, I developed strategies to improve my own personal performance in an autonomous work environment. Through my pitfalls and successes, I learned how I can effectively work with little or no guidance from supervisors. Self-guided work is a skill that demands a delicate balance between a flexible thinking and hard-nosed discipline. Overall, the internship gave me a good grasp of research work in academia and a good pulse on my own work and thinking habits. I will use the experience from this internship to improve the way I plan and achieve my own goals.