McDowell Farm School is a teaching farm with two goals: education of sustainable agriculture and food production. MFS is located in the new development of Camp McDowell (Episcopal Camp and Conference Center for the Diocese of Alabama) named Bethany Village. Usually their year is scheduled so that educational programs occur during the school year, and production of produce for dining halls occurs during the summer, but this summer there were farm programs with non-school groups and many structural projects like building chicken tractors. My role as farm intern was to support the full-time farm staff with morning and evening chores, seeding and planting, harvesting, processing fruits and vegetables, and moving the animals.

My two goals for the summer were to learn how to farm, and also learn how to program farming. Within the first week I realized that I would spend an entire lifetime trying to achieve just the first goal. The surplus of different techniques, philosophies, and attitudes towards farming makes farming a lifelong journey filled with day-to-day tasks as well as experiments.

During the first few days I learned the importance of being present on the farm, especially with the animals. Presence and attentiveness through physical touch and sight are important in assessing the health of your animal, but equally important are sound, smell and taste. For instance, the first few squirts of milk from the goats are the most important in determining the quality of the milk. Does it smell like milk? Is there blood or other particles in it? Practicing using all of my senses for knowledge has given me a more holistic experience of the world and continues to affect me after I left. In
addition to sensory attentiveness I honed my logical problem solving skills. Variables are always changing on the farm, like setting up proper paddocks while keeping in mind the rotation schedule as well as tending to land according to the plant that will grow there as well as the plant that will succeed it. Practicing logical thinking and efficient practices saves the farmer a lot of time and protects the animal or plant from disease.

Perhaps the largest effect I had on MFS was being another set of hands. Maintaining a farm requires an immense amount of work on its own, not including developing programming and curriculum as well as leading a few summer programs here and there. With a full-time staff of only four, two of those being in the office most of the time, being a member of the team expedited many of the tasks and allowed more time to finish projects. For instance, Andrew, my coworker, and I installed an herb garden in less than one day; and that included collecting and sifting compost as well as topsoil, gathering untreated railroad ties for the barrier, tilling the soil, buying the plants, arranging the plants in a functional way, mulching and watering the bed. While Andrew guided me in proper installation, it was my initiative.

The main piece of knowledge I take away from my farming experience comes from the lifestyle on a farm. It is very simple, very steady, and fairly slow. With both a farm and college courses, there seems to be endless work loads, but with college courses there is false hope that if you work hard enough then the work will be over, or then you will get high enough grades, or fill in the blank with your personal motivator. However with farming, while there are always tasks to complete, they are all concrete,
with a beginning and an end. There is no mystery about how long it will take to plant three two-hundred-foot-long rows of sweet potatoes. Rather than feeling like I was catching up, I felt like I was completing small and important tasks all day. I hope the feeling of peace and accomplishment stick with me in my work ethic senior year.

Another important lesson on the farm is dealing with and even mediating life and death. In particular, harvesting rabbits for the first time was the most intimate experience with death that I have ever had. It will always make me wonder how the US can produce meat so cheaply. I have eaten so much meat in my life with no real understanding of the story behind it, and the truth is that there probably was a wretched story behind much of it. Considering that history, and then intervening in these rabbits life for my consumption (and others) gave me tactile proof of the impact we have on the earth. It gave me a deep sense of gratitude for the life around me. I experience every meal since I left the farm differently, both ethically but also sensually in the flavor (or lack thereof). The reality of myself, thanks to food and farmers, is more put in place for me now.

I find myself so enlivened by the work that I did at the farm that I cannot imagine doing anything else. I was happy to get up in the morning, falling asleep peacefully every night, and constantly remembering truths that I had forgotten along the way of growing up.