This summer, I was given the opportunity to intern at the Friends of Canon Gideon Foundation (FOCAGIFO) in Kampala, Uganda. FOCAGIFO is a small NGO in Uganda that focuses on youth empowerment as a holistic approach to addressing the HIV/AIDS epidemic. One major branch of FOCAGIFO is the Hope Institute, which is a vocational institute located on the FOCAGIFO compound. The Hope Institute is a higher learning institution attended by youth after they have completed secondary school, which is equivalent to high school in the US. At the Hope Institute, youth gain practical skills in their core classes (i.e. Beauty & Cosmetology, Motor Vehicle Mechanics, Fashion & Design, Carpentry & Joinery), in order to help them generate a sustainable income for themselves and their families. However, the Hope Institute is unique because students also receive classes in transformational leadership, in addition to their core classes. These classes include leadership, communication, environmental awareness, community health, HIV/AIDS awareness, and other classes to the help provide the students with a holistic education. During my internship, I had the opportunity to teach both self-empowerment and communication classes to the first year students, along with another Sewanee intern (Emmy Walters). In our self-empowerment classes, we focused on power-balance in society, and specifically the benefits of sharing power equally between men and women in the household and communities. We also focused on strengths in our self-empowerment classes, and helped the students to think about their own strengths using the StrengthsQuest model. In our communication classes, we focused on student’s speech, and emphasized the importance of confidence, professionalism, eye contact, posture, and precise/effective communication. In line with communication classes, we also organized a series
of debates, where the students were given the opportunity to practice the skills they learned in class in a more formal setting. In addition to classes, we implemented other various projects such as a Health Cup, a mural, and a talent show. Finally, I also took on various office tasks such as creating a FOCAGIFO newsletter, an Intern Advice Handbook, and a Guild Handbook for the new guild members at the Institute, which is a student government organization.

Throughout the course of my internship, I was able to collaborate with four other Sewanee students (Emmy Walters, Parker Goss, Nancy Hua, and Alex Long), and together implement many projects which we hope will leave a sustainable impact on FOCAGIFO and the surrounding community.

Over the course of this internship, there were many moments that were very impactful and eye opening for me. The first was a self-empowerment class that Emmy and I taught regarding gender power-imbalance in communities. For this particular class, Emmy and I began the class with a game to demonstrate the prevalence of power imbalance in society. We had the students line up, and we read a series of statements that instructed the students step forward or backward based on their experiences (i.e. step backward if you have ever been discouraged from pursuing an activity you enjoy because of your gender). At the end of the game, the boys were significantly further ahead than the girls. After reading the statements, we told the students to race to another point, in order to demonstrate that society privileges men over women, which makes it more difficult for women to succeed. After this demonstration, we split the students up into boys and girls and had an open discussion about power imbalance, violence, and the benefits of sharing power in society. This class was certainly a learning experience for me, as I engaged
in an open discussion with the boys about power balance and the roles of men and women in society.

Quite honestly, I was internally frustrated a lot of the time, because the ideas the boys held about gender violence and gender roles were so culturally ingrained that it was difficult to address the issue in a culturally sensitive manner. One of the most frustrating aspects was the boys’ reliance on the Bible as justification for the imbalance of power in society (i.e. Adam & Eve). However, this experience taught me a lot about discussing social issues and the benefits of emphasizing the benefits of power balance, rather than reprimanding or criticizing the boys for their beliefs. I learned that when addressing social issues, if you criticize another groups’ beliefs in a degrading/patriarchal manner, they are not likely to be very receptive to the lesson. Instead, I learned that by emphasizing the benefits of respecting one another as equals was a much more effective way to address power-imbalance and violence against women. One of the points I found the boys to be especially receptive to was that sharing household responsibilities actually leads to a much more productive household and less marital stress. We also discussed how allowing women equal opportunity in the workplace opens up a whole pool of untapped labor in society, leading to an overall more productive society. Finally, we talked about how avoiding violence in relationships leads to an overall happier and more successful relationship. All of these ideas were based on the SASA curriculum, which is a curriculum designed by Ugandans for Ugandans to address power imbalance and violence against women.

Ultimately, this experience altered the way I will address social issues in the future. I think it is often easy to dismiss other people’s ideas as ignorant or backwards, without trying to understand the underlying cultural/social reasoning for these ideas. However, when discussing
these sensitive cultural/social issues, I found that it is much more beneficial to try to gain an understanding of where the ideas are coming from. Once you have this understanding, then you can emphasize the benefits of your approach (i.e. power balance, non-violent conflict resolution), in order to persuade the group to either engage in more positive behaviors or disengage from a harmful practice/behavior. Also, in the sense of global vocational work, this experience taught me that addressing social issues globally does not mean that you should try to make other cultures more like your culture. I think this makes understanding different cultural perspectives on a certain social issue even more imperative, in order to avoid a paternalistic approach to the issue. Overall, this experience helped me gain a better understanding of the importance of open-mindedness, cultural sensitivity, and approaching social issues through a lens of love and not hate.