This summer in Sewanee, thanks to funding from the Fund for Innovative Teaching and Learning (FITL), I was an intern for the Life Paths Research Program with Dr. Hamby in the Department of Psychology. The Life Paths Research Program is a positive psychology study that focuses on how people develop personal strengths and cope with adversity. Working on this research team was a unique experience because many psychological studies emphasize the negative aspects of trauma, such as the disorders that individuals develop after the traumatic event, rather than the positive. Furthermore, it is conducted in a rural Appalachian population that surrounds Sewanee, which observes a population that hasn’t been extensively studied in the past. As an intern for the program, I traveled to the counties that surround Sewanee, such as Franklin, Grundy and Marion, and distributed surveys, conducted qualitative interviews, and gathered data for the project.

During this past fall, the Templeton Foundation awarded Dr. Hamby with a grant, which has made this project possible. The Templeton Foundation is an organization that supports research on human purpose and ultimate reality, including topics such as forgiveness, love and free will. Since Mr. Templeton had a passion for open-mindedness and character development, he created the Laws of Life Essay Contest in 1987. This contest asks participants to select a “Law of Life,” such as “honesty is the best policy” or “do onto others as you would have them do onto you,” and to reflect on and relate these wise saying to their lives. In the surveys and interviews, we, the research team, ask the participants how writing the Laws of Life Essay affected them and what they took away from the writing experience. By gathering information on the essay writers’ experiences, we hope to see how they benefitted from it and how it has shaped their character.
As previously mentioned, there are two components to the research program—the electronic survey and the face-to-face interview. In order to recruit participants to take the survey, we attended local festivals on the weekends and asked passersby if they wanted to take it. The survey lasts about forty-five minutes to an hour and asks the participants questions about their past experiences, plans for the future, beliefs, views, the Laws of Life Contest, and demographic information. The survey is confidential and is open to people who graduated high school after 1987, which is when the essay contest began. Individuals, however, are allowed to partake in the survey even if they did not write a Laws of Life Essay. During my internship, I quickly learned that festivals were the most popular place for participants to take the survey; however, if people were unable to take the survey at festivals, we encouraged them to call our office and arrange a time and place for us to meet them. For assistance in providing data, participants were given a $30 gift card to Wal-Mart for taking the survey and could receive an additional $10 gift card if they provided a copy of their Laws of Life essay. With the survey, we hope to recruit 3,000 participants and assist them in developing personal strengths and overcoming challenges in their lives.

After participants take the electronic survey, if they are interested, they may partake in the qualitative interview. The qualitative is more selective than the survey because we only need 200 participants and want to focus on those who are from or live near Franklin County. The participant can meet a research interviewer either at the Life Paths Office in Sewanee, or the interviewer could come to the participant’s home. Similar to the survey, the interview covers topics such as the participant’s past experiences, values, beliefs, and plans for the future; however, it is more in-depth because the participants are given the opportunity to discuss their
life story with the interviewer rather than take a computerized survey. The qualitative takes approximately an hour, and for their time, participants receive a $50 gift card to Wal-Mart. With the qualitative interview, we hope to see interview 200 individuals and see how telling one’s narrative can be a reflective healing experience and how writing the Laws of Life Essay has developed the character development of prior participants.

Throughout this research and internship opportunity, I have learned how to adapt to different circumstances and to pop the “Sewanee bubble”. Venturing beyond the gates to meet with various participants opened my eyes not only to the differences between “the town and the gown” but also to the ignorance I tend to adopt as a student at Sewanee. Since Sewanee is up on a Mountain, I rarely drive down to see what Winchester, Cowan, Tullahoma, and other places are like. I felt that this research project enabled me to travel throughout Franklin County and have positive interactions with the people who live nearby. Furthermore, I had never been in a situation where I talked to strangers about incredibly moving and personal topics in a short period of time. As an interviewer this summer, I have asked the participants a range of personal questions that at times can be emotionally provoking. Although they can choose what they want to share, many participants are very open about their challenging experiences. This summer, I have been humbled by the adversity our participants have faced and not only how willing they have been to share these challenges but also the determination they have showed while coping with them.

Most aspects of the internship were positive, but there were times where I had to challenge myself. When I first arrived in the office, I jumped right into the research project and put my skills to the test. I think my biggest challenge during the internship was learning how to
act neutral as I interacted with and interviewed the participants. During the interview, not so much the survey since it is electronic, I had to prompt the participant with a question, listen to him or her talk about it, probe for specifics, and not say any words that the participant could perceive as negative or positive. Words like, “great,” “awesome,” “sorry,” etc. have different connotations, which can make the interviewee feel as if he or she is being judged. Also, if I identified with a person while he or she shared a traumatic event or an emotional experience, I had to remain professional and separate my personal feelings and thoughts. Even though doing these things during interviews was initially difficult, I learned to adapt and learned new skills. I do think that learning how to properly interview others for data collection is extremely important for future research opportunities, and I am thankful that I was given an opportunity in which I could implement it.

Although my internship for the summer has ended, the Life Paths Research Program is a three-year project and will continue to progress. This program is distinct because it is currently one of the most extensive research projects conducted in rural Appalachia. Furthermore, by having an age range that includes adults and adolescents, the data pool is quite diverse. To date, 920 people have taken the electronic survey, and there have been 110 participants for the qualitative interview. This project is going to offer substantial information to the psychology world, and I feel honored to have been given the opportunity to work on it. I wish Dr. Hamby and the research team the best of luck and hope to be involved with the project in the future.