Provide an overview of the organization/research project and a summary of your responsibilities, tasks, and/or projects.

This summer I had the opportunity to intern for Dr. Karen Kuers, Professor of Forestry at The University of the South, during the months of June and most of July. This internship was unique in that instead of being assigned to work on one large project, I completed a plethora of tasks during my internship with the other intern, Drew Philpott. Our work was conducted at Split Creek Watershed located on Brakefield Road in Sewanee, Tennessee. The main goal of the internship was to conduct a complete forest inventory of the Split Creek Watershed. However, inventory wasn’t the only thing Dr. Kuers wanted us to get accomplished. A few years ago, Dr. Kuers installed litter baskets made out of laundry baskets and black door screens at several locations in the watershed. Unfortunately, small critters came through the area and destroyed a lot of the baskets, preventing the litter baskets from accurately collecting leaf litter for her long-term project. Since Dr. Kuers was granted the opportunity to have summer interns, that is where we came in. Dr. Kuers came up with a new model that only required 0.5-inch Sharkbite PVC, fishing line, and black screen. It was a much simpler model. However, on rainy days, Drew and I spent a total of 4 full 8-hour days creating 53 litter baskets. Then, towards the end of the internship, we installed 4 baskets at each of the 13 locations.
On sunnier days, which were quite common, our duties included measuring dbh, height, and identifying each species in of the 50 inventory plots. These inventory plots were chosen to help students understand the different forest types and to have an idea of what tree species dominate in which areas. In order to complete the inventory plots, we first had to create the stakes to mark each inventory plot. Drew cut 2-foot 2x2 stakes using a miter saw while I painted the stakes with orange marking paint. Then, we made circular marking tags that were nailed to the top of the stake to label each plot number. Data collection and entry was another aspect of our internship that will not only benefit me in my remaining course work at Sewanee but, also in any career path I choose. I spent several rainy afternoons entering data in specific Excel sheets. While data entry was an important skill to learn, my favorite part of the data portion of the internship was collection and analyses of water samples from Split Creek and Abbos Alley. Collecting the water samples was fairly easy. However, analyzing the samples in the Hydrology lab was a very detailed process. I loved every second of working in the lab, but it made me nervous using the equipment since it was so expensive. It was really cool that Dr. Kuers allowed us to use the equipment in the lab to practice filtering water samples ourselves. The objective of using the lab was to compare the sediments found in local streams at Abbos Alley versus Split Creek. After completing our lab tasks, the samples were shipped off to a Hydrological lab for further analyses.

During your internship, what did you accomplish or how did you make a difference? In what ways did you grow in your professional and technical skills?

There were many things I found to be rewarding experiences during this internship and some things that were challenging. One of the most rewarding experiences I had as an intern was when Drew and I took the Sewanee Environmental Institute (SEI) kids out to Split Creek to demonstrate some of the projects we worked on during the summer. I have taken public speaking classes in the past at Sewanee. However, being able to talk about a subject that I was passionate and immersed in made a lot more enjoyable. Another thing I found to be helpful was being able to communicate effectively with other professors in the department. I realized that in order for you to learn more about a program or to make a difference, you must speak up. If you don't ever verbalize anything then no one is going to know that changes need to be made.

Describe a problem that you helped to solve at your internship. What skills or knowledge from your education at Sewanee helped you address the problem?

I found hand-sewing litter baskets to be extremely difficult. I remember being frustrated because I could only get two litter baskets done in one afternoon. This project was a challenging part of my internship experience. However, it taught me to not get frustrated about a challenge but rather be positive about getting better. Practice really does make perfect and when one has a good attitude about challenging tasks it makes it a lot easier to do them.

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

I learned to persevere and that it takes a team effort to get everything done in field and lab work.

How did your internship affect your career plans?

I realized that forest inventory might not be my career of choice. However, I became much more proficient in forest dendrology! With my interest in tree identification in mind, I want to further my studies by attending graduate school in Viticulture and Oenology. I learned so much from my summer assistantship about forest inventory practices and life skills that I will carry through the rest of my life.
In what ways did your internship cause you to encounter people of different backgrounds from your own? What steps did you take to communicate effectively with such persons? What did you learn from such persons' perspectives?

I learned to listen to others before speaking out. Another valuable lesson I learned was to be patient. Sometimes it takes time for something good to happen and with a good attitude the situation will typically have a better outcome. Most of the people in my place of work had similar perspectives related to forestry and the environment. However, for those who disagreed politically with me and wanted to argue I would usually just change the subject.

Words of advice for future interns (housing, transportation, etc.)?

Be proactive. Always do any prep work required ahead of time because it will save a lot of time! Also, don't forget to have fun and build valuable relationships with your professors!

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:

Dr. Kuers: Thank you for allowing me to intern for you this summer. I learned so much about forest inventory, myself, and the world. Although forest inventory might not be my forte, I have enjoyed practicing using the Haglof and the Tru Pulse and working in the lab. It was truly a treat going into work every day and I'm so thankful I had the chance to experience what a real field/ lab forestry career would be like. Thank you so much again!