This summer I worked as a field assistant for East Carolina University (ECU). Kayla Weinfurther, a graduate student at ECU, is conducting a project focusing on the “Comparative analysis of feeding mode, gene expression and microbiome composition in poison frog tadpoles”. The project was funded by the National Geographic Society and was conducted in Tarapoto, Peru. As a field assistant, my duties included: searching for appropriate field sites in Peru (on foot and in a vehicle); catching, identifying and marking poison frogs in the field (Rantiomeya imitator and R. variabilis); monitoring breeding pairs in the field; catching weighing and measuring poison frog tadpoles in the field; performing ecological field experiments involving transplantations of tadpoles across pools in the field; and collecting and processing tadpoles for genomic and microbiome analyses.

During my internship, I was given the opportunity to familiarize myself with different methods to study frogs. Learning to identify frogs and their tadpoles in the field, along with the necessary methods to dissect tadpoles, has taught me the work involved with being a field biologist. Working in a different country has helped me grow my knowledge of Spanish and different environmental systems. This summer has also provided an opportunity to get to know other field biologists and ways to collaborate to reach a common goal. Working together to preserve resources, flora, and fauna has shown that people from all around the world can collaborate.
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?

Throughout my internship there were many times where I encountered people with different personalities or mentalities than me, which is a great thing. It only became a problem if I encountered a person that was extremely negative towards my work and my personality. Throughout my time at Sewanee, there have been many times where I have collaborated with people I do not agree with on certain aspects. Knowing that the work needs to get done regardless, and with the best possible attitude, has helped me overcome these issues. Just because I do not agree with someone on certain topics does not mean I cannot work with them to achieve a common goal.

In what way were your teamwork skills strengthened?

This summer I worked directly with a graduate student: we were a team. We worked well at communication and trust. We both have a mutual love for nature and conducting scientific studies. With our shared interests, it helped to strengthen our team so we could be efficient and effective in and out of the field.

How did your internship affect your career plans?

It helped show me what my path could be like if I chose to continue to conduct research in the field in a different country. I was able to better understand the background work needed to apply for funding and apply for permits to conduct research in other countries.

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?

Living in Peru for the summer has given me many opportunities to encounter people of different backgrounds. Being able to communicate effectively with them in Spanish allowed us to understand one another. They shared their perspective on foreign biologists coming to their country to study their land. A lot of times the local people see biologists in a negative light, simply because they do not fully understand what they are studying. I was able to explain to them that any research to be conducted in Peru must be approved, and approval can be very difficult to get. I also explained to them that half the samples of what is being researched must be turned in to the National Museum in Lima. After explaining our project and the background behind it, the locals were very friendly and helpful.

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

Tarapoto is extremely hot so get ready to sweat all the time. Also, you need to feel comfortable hitchhiking and riding in the back of pickup trucks or else transportation will be extremely difficult for you.

Words of thanks to your internship funding donors:

I would like to give a huge thank you to my internship funding donor. Conducting scientific experiments to better understand the world around us is extremely important, and I am thankful other people see its importance as well. Without your help my summer would have been extremely different. Thank you.