

Paige Kleidermacher – Margolis Summer Internship Reflection

In March, I thought I had my summer all figured out. As part of my fellowship, I would be on Duke's campus, forming close bonds with my cohort, and engaging in some form of environmental science research. As a meticulous planner, I was excited about this structure and predictability, but alas, I could not foresee the impending pandemic that would swiftly upend all of our lives. Subsequently, a series of seemingly random events led me to the Margolis Summer Internship Program and placement in The Center for Policy Impact in Global Health (CPIGH) lab. This opportunity challenged my proclivity for predictability: my global health background was limited, and the internship was going to be "virtual." Although a bit uncertain, I still was hopeful.

Happily, I believe this summer has been one of the most enriching experiences I have ever had. It was probably my first experience working in a professional team setting, but surely my first time in an entirely *online* professional setting. I was wary that the "theme" the summer would be adapting to a new virtual landscape. However, this transition was smooth, albeit with a small learning curve. In the end, I would not say that the skills I developed, and my engagements with peers and faculty were possible *despite* a remote setting. They were just possible.

I learned many critical professional skills and best practices while also building confidence engaging in group settings with dedicated faculty. I believe my mentor and other team members at the CPIGH were responsible for such a positive experience. The group's encouragement and support allowed me to explore previously unknown subjects and not be afraid to make mistakes. More importantly, the group's focus and camaraderie became an outlet that gave my life some normalcy amidst the life-altering pandemic. In such uncertain times, this support was vital not just for productivity but also for mental sanity.

In addition to the productive relationship with the faculty, I am also grateful for the connections I made with the other students. Weathering a pandemic at home has been isolating, but interactions with my peers through my fellowship and Margolis has allowed me to feel connected to Duke and a broader community. It is quite remarkable that we were able to connect so well over a computer screen despite sometimes being separated by hundreds of miles and multiple time zones.

While this summer taught me valuable professional skills, I also discovered a lot about my intellectual goals. Although I had been committed to studying environmental science, I became increasingly drawn and fascinated by global health. I now plan on pursuing global health as a joint major while examining the various interactions between global health and environmental policy. What started as a series of unfortunate and chance events has led to a remarkably transforming experience that will have long-lasting effects on my academic future. Perhaps my most valuable lesson this summer was about the importance of keeping an open mind and allowing for less calculated planning. As unsettling as it may be, sometimes the most exciting, meaningful experiences are those that happen unexpectedly.