This summer, I worked at Purpose, a public benefit corporation that builds and accelerates social movements to tackle our world’s greatest challenges. As a strategy intern, I worked closely with my manager in a team of four to collaborate with a leading foundation and develop a guide that funders and civil society organizations can use to increase citizen participation in the developing world. My specific role was to conduct desk research on citizen participation around the world and eventually I began to take ownership over certain parts of our guide. Near the end of our internship, we neared 80% completion of our guide in preparation for a case study on citizen participation in Mexico.

My manager Emma was the best boss I’ve ever had. We are very similar in terms of personality and work styles. This similarity meant that she could really understand and help me grow as an individual and as a strategist. I am so, so grateful to have had her mentorship. I learned more about presenting information, research, thinking, and working with others than I had ever dreamed. My relationship with Emma grounds what she advised me about future work: that whom you work with is just as important as where you work and what you work on. My biggest successes include gaining her trust to really take ownership over an important part of our guide. I researched more than a dozen participatory initiatives to develop a matrix showing the different permutations of initiatives and wrote multiple case studies about successful campaigns.
Challenges and Lessons

My biggest challenge, on the other hand, was learning how to engage in meetings. Since this was my first internship at a company with more than 10 employees, it was a challenge to understand how to contribute effectively and navigate different relationships. After much reflection and coaching with my team members, I have a much better idea about how to manage working relationships in the future.

Having said that, I’ve learned several important skills during my internship at Purpose. Notably, my ability to present information visually in a PowerPoint has increased dramatically. I feel very comfortable using PowerPoint at an elevated level. In addition, I have improved my research and problem solving by developing a hypothesis-driven approach. This, I hope, will enable more efficient research at school and in future similar positions. Finally, I’ve learned how to think more strategically by learning how to build and break apart an idea.

A Renewed Focus on Participation

I see that this experience has given me a lot of new ideas and ways of thinking around social change and social entrepreneurship. First, my new ways of thinking around building social movements are grounded in this idea of participation. I hope to integrate this idea into whatever work I do. Second, I deeply appreciated working a place where the work mattered to the world and where people loved doing their work. I felt refreshed when I walked out of the office, feeling confident that I supported some type of world change. I want to continue pursuing work that matters, but I also know that I need to continue to develop my skills and that there is much that I don’t know. I now firmly believe that successful social change depends on getting people to act and participate. This is the core of Purpose’s theory of change. Solving our world’s greatest challenges will not come from changing people’s minds, but getting people to act in unison toward change and growing that participation. I now am always thinking about how to get people to participate, whether in petitions, campaigns, sharing notions of good food,
Purpose's 2015 summer intern team.

protesting, etc. This is what we call new power, or the shift of change making to the hands of the masses.

In the world of activism, campaigning, and strategy, however, I still have much more to learn. Specifically, I would like to learn how to effectively move people to action. Much of my work at Purpose involved abstract thinking and I was itching to do work on the ground.

Reflections

My goals at the onset of this experience were to improve my strategic thinking skills, meet people, and increase my confidence. My strategic thinking skills improved through my research and meetings with my project team. I observed and asked how they thought through different intellectual challenges in order to hone my own capacities. Their questions and ways of thinking will stay with me. In terms of meeting people, I had tea with someone at Purpose on average of about once a week. This was a tremendous opportunity to learn about how people got to Purpose, which was helpful in reflecting about my own journey at this point. Finally, my manager and I identified that I should work on my confidence in my work. At one point this summer, I expressed dissatisfaction with some of the work I did because it wasn't "right" the first time. With her help, I learned that producing high quality work takes time and different pivots. Over the summer, I internalized this idea of iteration.
If I were to do this again, I would more aggressively seek abilities to participate in other projects and ventures. While I did really in-depth work in my project, I was curious to see what the other interns (who had vastly different roles and responsibilities) were doing. Getting more breadth in would have helped me have a better idea about what I would like to do in the future. Part of this whole confidence thing is having the confidence that what I’m doing in this moment is right, so I actually don’t feel that I could have done much differently. Making my early mistakes when I was getting my feet wet was exactly what I needed to do in this new line of work.

Looking Forward

10 years from now, I want to always remember being surrounded by other interns and workers who were all working toward social change. Purpose brings together technologists, campaigners, architects, strategists, and creatives to change the world. Sometimes this brings immense challenges, but I believe that this interdisciplinary approach is so valuable to reaching and activating the most people. I felt so inspired by every facet of the work at Purpose, from producing videos to redefine peace, organizing a campaign to spark a national conversation about good jobs, and creating an app that will get people to act for change in our food system.

I’d also like to take away the importance of people power in creating social change.

Thank you CSE at Middlebury for helping to make this possible. It was the best summer and internship of my college career, and I am so grateful to begin my senior year with this experience in tow.