This summer was a life changing experience for many reasons. I not only learned a lot about non-profit organizations and international development, but I also formed relationships with amazing people that I hope to never forget. Two other students and I interned at Busoga Trust (BT), an organization working to provide alternative and domestic water sources and sanitation knowledge to rural communities in the Busoga kingdom of Uganda. BT communities are very rural and largely agrarian. Community members obtain water from a traditional source, typically a muddy pond or swamp-like hole. Open defecation is common, sanitation is poor, and therefore living conditions can be very dirty. Water sources often contain bacteria and other contaminants that cause health problems. Use of this water for drinking, cooking, and bathing contributes to a higher rate of water-borne and communicable diseases.

While working in the field with Busoga Trust, we stumbled upon a school that had extremely poor sanitation. The school is located in a village called Buseera C., and it has 150 enrolled students, 68 boarding, ages five through thirteen. One of the main challenges the school faces is ensuring the continued education of female students. It is common for girls to stop attending school when they reach puberty due to cultural norms and lack of resources.

The school, opened two years ago, is private and receives no government funding and must rely on the small tuition fees for funding. This leaves little room for improvements. The school had two run-down pit latrines, and no hand washing
facilities or bathhouses, leaving students to bathe with very limited privacy behind a tree. This presented a challenge for the older female students, as they had no place to change clothes or supplies when menstruating.

We decided to collaborate with the teachers at Ravo Primary School to create the Sanitation, Heath and Personal hygiene Education Program (S.H.A.P.E.). This program included information on germs, communicable diseases, and sexual health; directions on how to construct hand washing stations and reusable sanitary pads for girls; and discussion of practices such as using pit latrines, washing hands, and safe sex practices. To compile information for the program, we did research at RPS and used resources found on the internet. We visited the school to interview the teachers, explore existing curricula, and sit in on a hygiene class. After assembling the findings of our research, we printed it out and brought it to the school to get the teachers’ feedback. We also constructed two sample homemade reusable sanitary pads, one for RPS and one for BT. We gave the sample and directions to the female teachers. When we returned to the school they gave us their critiques, and we made the changes they suggested. The female teachers had already started constructing their own sanitary pads.

Because our project was mostly educationally based, it did not cost very much money. We had a seed fund that we were able to use, so we decided that we would work with RPS to physically improve their sanitation. We contributed some (less than 50%) of the materials needed to help the school build two bathing houses for the students.
Some of the most important insights and lessons I learned while in Uganda were remaining flexible and respectful of cultural norms that were different from my own. We often had to work around BT’s schedule that changed frequently. We needed to be respectful because the concept of time is extremely different in Uganda. Many of the people in Uganda do not keep time; they are more task oriented than time oriented. We would set a meeting for 2:00, and people would not start showing up until 4:00. It was not until a few weeks into my trip that I was discussing this with one of my coworkers, and she explained to me that many of the villagers are late for the meetings because they have been working hard and long hours in the field all day, and the first thing they do when they return is eat lunch. I learned to not become so frustrated, and to try my best to learn underlying meanings and explanations.

Some of the other important insights I gained while in Uganda stemmed from my time spent with my wonderful host family. I was in a house full of children who were always dancing, singing, talking, or just watching television. Two of the most important insights I gained were the significance of family and religion. Those two things were of paramount importance to the family I lived with, and other families with whom other students lived. The grandmother I lived with was raising six of her grandchildren, and put food on the table for them, kept them safe, and made sure they were going to school every day. She cared about her grandchildren immensely and set a wonderful example for them. All my host siblings looked out for one another, and they cared about each other deeply. Their sense of love and support impacted me greatly and made me feel welcome and part of the family from the
beginning. Religion is the other huge part of their lives. Everyone in my host family was Christian. They asked me many times if I was saved, and they went to church every Sunday. They followed the beliefs and values of their religion very closely. I attended church with them one weekend and I saw how devoted and extremely important their religion is to them.

I also learned a lot about the challenges and difficulties that go along with international development. On paper, an international development project can seem easy and simple; it is not. Many things can go wrong, whether it is with an organization, a community, or something else. Communities can be disinterested, lacking resources, or wanting to take advantage of foreigners with money. I found international development to be extremely difficult, and I know that many others did as well.

I have made many connections between the academic and service work I have done for GSJP so far. In past GSJP courses, we have discussed service as working with not for people; we have also discussed privilege and oppression. All of these came into play while I was in Uganda. I needed to work with the community to figure out what resources and assets they had within their community that we could use and utilize for the project. I also now understand first hand what it means to have privilege and to be on the lookout for signs of oppression.

Academically, I am extremely interested in justice and the environment. Past courses such as PULSE and Environmental Law and Policy taught me a great combination of social justice and the laws that are in place to protect the environment. Because I worked at a clean water organization, the information I
learned in both of those classes was very applicable to my work. I am currently taking the courses Peace or War and Geosciences I. Even though I have only been in class for a few days, I can already see that my experience has made a great impact on the way I am thinking. When discussing foreign policy and the United States’ impact on other countries, either negatively or positively, I am able to think of examples in the relationship between Uganda and the U.S., both economically and politically. I learned a lot about wells, precipitation, and groundwater while I was working for Busoga Trust, and I am able to apply that knowledge in my Geosciences I course.

This experience has led me to ask many questions. The major question I have been pondering is how this experience will affect my future decisions and paths I take in life. In my future academic and personal life I want to explore the histories and cultures of other countries around the world. I want to understand why so many people are living in extreme poverty, while I sit here and type on my fancy laptop. I want to know what I can do to make a difference at the structural level to change the way the United States treats other countries. I want to know how my interest in law and the environment can make a difference.