

## UCDC Experience of Rita Wainess

This past spring of 2018, I had the incredible opportunity to participate in the UCDC Program through UC Berkeley. After undergoing a competitive application process, I was one of the students selected to spend my semester in Washington, DC, while taking two courses, writing a research paper, and working at a full-time internship. As an interdisciplinary studies major, I am interested in different disciplines that come together around international relations and human wellbeing, through fields such as peacebuilding, human rights, and development. For this reason, I chose to intern at Search for Common Ground, the world's largest international non-profit NGO in peacebuilding, whose main mission is to end violent conflict. I was a member of the Design, Monitoring, and Evaluation for Peace team and worked on a large project that included data analysis and partnering people for a mentorship project that my team had created for the peacebuilding community. I also created infographics, worked with excel and Microsoft word, wrote a blog, performed media and professional email outreach, and learned about other team projects, such as proposal writing. Finally, I was able to participate and represent Search in different forums, including a discussion hosted by our organization with the ex-presidents of Bolivia and Slovenia, and at the World Bank Fragility Forum 2018. What I found most appealing about the organization were the workers who are not elected officials, yet are passionate about helping the people and nations with which the NGO works, are able to use their skills and research to directly influence the decisions of the government on foreign aid. Being professionals of the civil engagement in this field, they attend Congress hearings and brief the members to help guide the policies that will be implemented and will affect many other people and countries.

Aside from the amazing experience I earned through Search, I spent a lot of time working on the research paper. As my major is research-based, this was great practice for the thesis that I will write in the upcoming semester. My assignment was researching the major human trafficking crisis that Libya has been experiencing, tracing it back to effects from NATO's intervention in their civil war, and supporting the UN's critique of the European Union's methods of handling the situation as a migration crisis rather than what it is. I am passionate about the topic of international interventions and the involvement of western powers in post-colonial nations, so the ability to choose my own topic and delve into this was quite empowering.

One of the interesting aspects of the timing of my participation is that it was occurring during the social and political turmoil that the Trump presidency has stirred in the nation. Many of my peers, coworkers, and DC inhabitants were frazzled, believing that this was proof of a flaw in the democratic system that our country was built on. However, it is obvious through some media, the pro-Trump rallies, and the ultimate presidential outcome that a large portion of the population believes the exact opposite- that this shows the fine work of democratic engagement, seeing the candidate for whom they had voted be elected despite the push of the Democratic left. In a way, the ability for the now-seeming 'minority' to have sway in national politics is definitely a part of the democratic engagement our forefathers desired. However, it is also important to recognize that when the country becomes so divided that its people see their political opposites as nearly enemies, there must be some factors of this democracy that need work. My DC class on toxic rhetoric addressed this point well, discussing issues like how the work of Cambridge Analytica through Facebook had influenced people's decisions and thoughts

by showing people posts that agreed with their views, and therefore suppressing engagement and respectful, educational political discussions.

While UCDC was a very rigorous program, there was also time for some touring of our nation's capital, one-on-ones with a personal mentor, and professional networking. Through it all, one of the greatest lessons that I learned was the realization that no matter what path I choose, whether to go to grad school, law school, or work after graduation, as long as I follow my ambitions and passion, I will be able to help the world in the ways in which I hope. UCDC was an eye-opening and incredible program that has greatly prepared me for the real world. I would also like to thank the Center on Civility and Democratic Engagement for the scholarship award, as my experience in UCDC would not have been possible without their help.

This program encouraged me to continue with other hands-on programs, pushing me to participate in one through the International Association of Research Institutions, focused on international development and borderlands in the global south. There, I spent a month in Chiang Mai, Thailand, taking the provided course, creating a detailed thesis proposal, and doing a short internship with a professor of engineering, under whom I learned about clean and wastewater management, relocation of people for government projects, and the participation of all levels of community in development. I plan to continue taking advantage of such opportunities, sculpting myself to be better prepared and suited for helping the world.