

## Working as CEAC Interns During COVID-19

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CEAC Interns

This summer we had the opportunity to intern for CEAC. We are both students at Middlebury College, one studying environmental economics and the other mathematics, and we were given separate projects to work on. One of us worked on conducting a greenhouse gas inventory of Addison County, the other primarily on an online resource guide for climate-friendly businesses in the Champlain Valley. Working remotely, living in different states far from Vermont, presented challenges for both of us but also had many benefits.



A big challenge both of us faced was solely using our computers for our internships. It can be a strain to look at a computer screen for six hours a day.

It also was hard to be sedentary. We discussed often how at college, attending classes, studying, and eating meals are always broken up by walking around the campus, and talking with friends. Working remotely definitely pushed us to create our own breaks and pace ourselves with regards to screen time.

Another major challenge, completing our work during the COVID-19 crisis, was reaching people via phone and email. With many people not working or at least working from home, we found it sometimes took several weeks to reach an individual or business, to ask for a data input or to fill out the resource guide survey.

In addition, we felt as if there was the missed opportunity of spending the summer in Vermont. With many previous plans to explore waterfalls and local farms, we definitely missed out on getting to experience that aspect of an in-person internship.

It also would have been exciting to enter a new work environment. Most summer internships involve building relationships with co-workers, whether through assigned projects or shared lunch breaks. As we did not get the chance to work in an office setting or even have physical interactions, these small chances to get to know each other and our advisors were missing from the summer.

However, working remotely during the pandemic also had many positives. Both of us gained more experience with Zoom, learning how to schedule meetings and share our screens. The technical world of virtual communication is truly different than anything we've experienced before. It seems that workplaces around the world are considering moving forward with remote work, even past projected pandemic times. Having spent so much time communicating online and across time zones, we feel fully prepared for whatever skills may be required in future jobs.

We also appreciated the flexibility that the internships afforded us. We could do our work from anywhere with an internet connection, at any time, as long as we got it done. For one of us that meant being able to travel to visit family, and for the other it meant a stricter self-imposed work schedule, with opportunities for midday swims in the lake.

It also was important that we had something to work on that we are passionate about during quarantine. Many of our peers were left without their summer jobs or internships, so we felt we were very lucky, especially being able to engage in something that connects us to the Champlain Valley.

So often at Middlebury, students feel distanced from the surrounding community. We tend to be so stuck in our daily lives and assignments, that we do not get to know the amazing people outside of our small campus. While remote working isn't the easiest way to meet people, we still found many opportunities to get to know a wide variety of people. From small-business owners to local officials, we loved getting to talk to people about our projects and shared interest in climate change. We felt the work we were doing gave us a deeper connection to the people in the region that has become so important to us over the past few years.

Something that surprised both of us was how seamless our internships could be made remotely, as they were originally supposed to be in person. For the greenhouse gas inventory, most of it would have been online anyway, although there definitely were missed opportunities to meet people and visit different sites around the County.

Another surprise was how quickly we were welcomed into CEAC. A major fear with remote working is that deep connections cannot be made through a screen. However, as soon as our first Zoom meeting, we were welcomed with open arms and thrown into our project groups. It was amazing to get to know this group of people and regularly meet with them, even if we never saw each other in person. There was such passion and knowledge that transcended the physical boundaries of remote work. We built deep relationships that were truly memorable.

One nice surprise was that we interns were actually able to make one face-to-face interaction this summer. Although we were living and working in different parts of the country, we were able to meet each other in person when one of us came to visit family who coincidentally lived a 10 minute drive away from the other, in Minnesota. We went on a swim in a nearby lake, physically distanced, of course, and noted what a chaotic state of the world we are in.

Having a remote internship during COVID-19 was not what either of us planned, but it nevertheless both taught us a lot and had many perks. We are excited to see the future work that CEAC engages in, and feel more than ready to jump into more virtual endeavors.