

Sunflower County Freedom Project

(These reviews are available in Robertson Connect)

Tamira Daniely (UNC '22)

I worked at the Sunflower County Freedom Project in Sunflower Mississippi. It is about a 30-minute drive from the Delta House. I taught 9th-grade reading using the book *12 Years a Slave*. I also taught a Creative Club, which is like an elective, called Art Expression. What was amazing about my job is how quickly you connect with these kids and become someone they admire. I also enjoyed seeing the impact I was making, like students increasing their reading level or getting better at painting by the end of the summer.

Bennett David (Duke '22)

I worked as a TA at the Sunflower County Freedom Project in Sunflower, MS. My main responsibilities were to plan and teach classes and spend time with (and discipline) the ~50 middle-school-aged Freedom Fellows (students). After a week-long training session with the full-time staff (us TAs learned what the program does, how a typical day goes, and strategies for discipline), I began work as a TA in reading class and as the teacher of my own robotics club. As a TA in reading, I would aid the lead teacher in any way I could (answering questions, handing out materials, keeping students focused). As a robotics teacher, I would plan my classes and gather my materials when I was away from the SCFP (creating presentations, typing out scripts, drawing up how long activities would take), and then teach the class about three times every two weeks. After two weeks of being a reading TA, I assumed responsibility for the 8th grade class, planning and teaching lessons (as I did in robotics) for the remainder of the academic period. After five total weeks of academic classes, the trip stage of the Freedom Summer began. The trips were oriented around the Civil Rights Movement, so we visited famous sites in cities like Montgomery, Selma, and Birmingham. The summer ended with a immersive college experience trip at Ole Miss. Freedom Fellows lived in a college dorm, took SCFP-taught classes in college lecture halls (I taught an updated version of my robotics course), and learned all about campus life.

I highly recommend teaching at the SCFP, especially if you want a job that is high-energy, emotionally engaging, fast-paced, intense, and social. While the lessons you may expect to learn at the SCFP might be about social inequities, culture/community, and learning to appreciate work that doesn't necessarily "move the needle," the lessons I learned weren't really in those areas. I entered the summer with a decent understanding of the conditions of the community I was entering, and an attitude that I needed to do the best job I could for the kids I came in contact with--a friend once told me to "find your little corner of the world and do what you can to help it." I recommend going in with this mindset, as it allowed me to stay effective and focused on the kids in front of me, rather than becoming consumed/depressed by the larger systemic issues the SCFP and Sunflower County has struggled with for decades on end--8 weeks is not a long time, and you have to stay sharp. The lessons I learned were instead all about teaching, and what students need: students can only respond well to discipline if they feel respected... teaching is often about the material, but is also very personality-driven... being a friend to the students is sometimes just as important as being a teacher... the students who give you a hardest time are often the most appreciative when you leave... you have to look for ways to engage the quieter students so they don't become disheartened... make sure to encourage even the students who don't seem to like you... it's good to be checking in with all the students, but also be working to "find your people," as each TA finds a few students in particular that they connect with on a wonderful level.

Ruth Fetaw (UNC '22)

I had the opportunity of teaching Rhetoric (Speech & Debate) to 7th-9th graders and a creative club called Protecting My Peace. For 7th graders I focused on introducing them to speech categories, demonstrating the power in our words and aiding them in their search for pieces or writing their own for the upcoming tournament. As for 8th-9th grade, I got to step out of my comfort zone and coach them in Mock Trial, where they were given a case and played roles consisting of prosecutor and defense lawyers, and star witnesses. Throughout Protecting My Peace, fellows learned about a variety of topics, ranging from the misconceptions on struggling with one's mental health to the significant benefits of de-stressing tactics like meditation and yoga.

Although this summer scratched the surface of a professional teacher's workload and responsibilities, I've gained a newfound respect for my past teachers and all they do; lesson planning, grading assignments, disciplinary action, empathy shown, etc. In addition, I learned more about black history, from the Freedom Riders to Dr. King, Medgar Evers, the importance of HBCU's and more. Although I was familiar with some of these people and places, I got the chance to expand my knowledge greatly because the history lessons were a priority and not an option. I was able to visit some historic sites like the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of the horrific Bloody Sunday beatings and where Dr. King lead thousands after to protest for black voting rights. I knew of this place due to school textbooks and movies, but seeing it up and close was breathtaking. I was moved to be in spaces where great leaders once stood. Before this summer, I never thought much of the south besides it's dark history, but I am reminded now that there is much strength and beauty as well. I'm grateful for the fellows I worked with each day and their continual kindness, joy, and drive for knowledge. These kids have so much to give and I can't wait to see them take the world by storm. To the staff, thank you for your love, encouragement, and accountability. My heart is with Sunflower County and the amazing work the Freedom Project does to give students more opportunities at success.

I completely recommend my internship at Sunflower!!

Liza Becker (Duke '21)

The SCFP is housed in the LEAD center, a small building in Sunflower, MS about a 25 minute drive from Cleveland. The summer was broken down into 3 phases: First the TAs went through orientation and training for a week in order to gain some concrete teaching skills, plan lessons, familiarize ourselves with the mission and goals of the freedom project (social justice and civil rights education, college preparedness, etc), and have important discussions about varying social determinants that would affect our summers. Second, we taught the 7th-9th grade students for five weeks. This involved being a TA for one academic class (math, reading, or rhetoric) along with two other TAs and one "lead teacher", teaching a "creative club" class with one other TA, participating in fitness class and study session, and in general being on our toes and hard at work without any breaks for 10ish hours a day. Third, the last part of the summer is devoted to field trips with the students. Each TA went on a camping trip with either 7th or 8th graders for 3 days, went on a camping trip with all high school students for 2 days, and went on the college immersion trip to Ole Miss with all students for 5 days. These camping trips involve visits to famous civil rights sites throughout the south, museums, college visits, and outdoor swimming and camping.

DO THIS JOB (if you enjoy working hard for long hours, working with young people, education, social justice, and throwing yourself into new things!)!!!!!!!!!!!! I would absolutely recommend this job to driven, organized, energetic, and passionate scholars that are also socially and culturally interested/aware of people from backgrounds differing from their own. I learned a ton by being thrown into a lot of situations where I had no choice but to step up and lead- thats a lot of what teaching is though, standing up in front of groups whether you're plans are falling into place or not and making something meaningful work for the students. Only do this job if you're going to be disciplined and give 120% all summer regardless of whatever else is going on- the students there deserve no less. If you end up taking this job, get so excited! Forming relationships with the students happens so quickly and before you know it you'll all be devastated that you're leaving.

As for advice outside of this internship, I'd encourage scholars to deliberately take some "me time" a few times a week if not every day. Even if you think you're extremely social and outgoing, this job takes a lot out of you, as does living with so many other people. Be deliberate about getting some peace and quiet to reflect and ensure that you're acting as intentionally as possible during your short time in Mississippi.

Finally, once you start to learn more about and fall in love with Mississippi, do not waste your time feeling disheartened and defeated at the state of education, healthcare, race relations, food security, or whatever other topic you may choose to focus on. Not to say that you shouldn't notice and get upset at these things, but understand that because you are there for such a short time (for now), you will not be able to change much. Be active. Do everything you can to learn and help where appropriate while you're there! Don't waste energy getting disappointed; collaborate at your workplace and with other scholars and make the most good happen in your 8 weeks.

Adam Enggasser (UNC '21)

For my community summer, I worked at the Sunflower County Freedom Project (SCFP) as a teaching assistant, or TA. The SCFP is a voluntary enrichment program for students in Sunflower County, MS that supplements the education students receive in school and provides them with additional knowledge and skills. Every summer, the SCFP hosts "Freedom Summer," an intense program for middle-school students modeled after the Freedom Schools that were a part of the Civil Rights Movement. As a TA, I joined the teaching team for this summer's programming.

For the first 5 weeks of Freedom Summer, all of the students were in the building, going through something very similar to school. All students would rotate through math, reading, and rhetoric, followed by a "creative club" that TAs design and a fitness class at the end of the day. Each day, I was responsible for running the rising 9th-grade math class and helping all of the other math classes, along with running an aviation club for the first 2 weeks of Freedom Summer. Additionally, I spent every free moment with the students, befriending them and having meaningful conversations about life, relationships, school, etc.

The final 3 weeks of Freedom Summer involve going on trips with the students – this was the best part! At this point in the summer, all of the TAs had become pretty close with the Freedom Fellows (what we call our students), preparing us to go on 3 camping trips (split by grade) followed by one collective trip to the University of Mississippi. During the camping trips, students were exposed to museums, college tours, civil rights sites, enrichment activities, the natural world, and more. These camping trips were a great time to get to know the students on a more personal level outside the classroom and really begin to mentor them. The final trip to the University of Mississippi was fantastic! Everyone loaded up into vans and headed to campus, where students would stay in the dorms, eat in the dining halls, take "college classes" taught by TAs, and learn more about the entire college process. This last trip was the final thing we did with the Freedom Fellows and was surely a highlight of the summer! By this time, everyone had really bought into the program and had formed a great community, making it difficult to leave.

If you're remotely interested in teaching, I would highly recommend heading to the SCFP for your Community Summer! It's a lot of work being with the Freedom Fellows all day, every day for long hours but it is truly meaningful work. Throughout the summer, you will be able to see tangible results of your work and can leave knowing you at least made a small difference in the students' lives. If you're looking for an easy/short internship or want something to allow you to pursue other interests, the SCFP is not for you. It is one of the longest internships for Community Summer and is very demanding; hours are long, you will have to be prepared for class every day, the trips can be exhausting, and there are virtually no breaks while you are at work. The SCFP is very structured and has high expectations that you will meet during the summer. That being said, virtually all of the work I did this summer was enjoyable and meaningful; you will be working directly with students that want help and you will not be doing someone's busy work. I would surely go back to the SCFP and do it all again.

As far as location goes, I don't think you can go wrong with Mississippi. It's great fun being in a large house with ~10 people, there are large cities around to travel to throughout the summer, and it's very feasible to meet up with other scholars in New Orleans and Whitesburg. On most weekends, we ended up driving a pretty good distance to go and visit somewhere nearby and explore the region, traveling to places like Memphis, Jackson, New Orleans, Nashville, Little Rock, etc. We also visited many of the smaller cities around like Clarksdale, Greenville, Mound Bayou, and many more. I would highly recommend traveling a good bit this summer, this was one of my favorite parts! With a large group and plenty of cars, it was easy to find someone to explore with, giving us plenty of options besides sitting around the house twiddling our thumbs.

Naraya Price (UNC '21)

The Sunflower County Freedom Project is a non-profit organization founded twenty years ago with the purpose of serving Black youth in the community that has been, and continues to be, subjected to generations of underinvestment and discrimination by the public school system and state policies. I saw how many of my students faced compounded levels of discrimination that inhibited their ability to succeed.

Black communities are inundated with food insecurity and inadequate access to healthy foods, teen births in Sunflower County far exceed the national average almost three-fold, 90% of Black families in Sunflower County live below the poverty line. In school, students are taught no civil rights history aside from the menial lesson during Black

history month. These statistics may sound overwhelming, but they speak to the severity of the environment you will step into, and that is something I was not aware of before I arrived.

Despite these heartbreaking aggressions, the students you will work with are not ignorant of the issues I previously mentioned. They are aware, and more importantly, they are resiliently hopeful; they are a representation of the name of their county; they are sunflowers, deeply rooted in their history and learning from that history to grow towards a brighter future. And as an intern at the freedom project, you get to get to know their jubilant, young, and hopeful spirits and be a part of their journey towards a brighter future.

The biggest advice I have is to do a lot of pre-reading. There is so much literature on the uniqueness and trivial environment that is the MS, Delta. The Senator and the Sharecropper: The Freedom Struggles of James O. Eastland and Fannie Lou Hamer will truly help your understanding of the MS Delta, specifically the public school system. Be aware and ready to fully immerse yourself in an unfamiliar culture. You do not get to be there for a year, you are there for 8-10 weeks, so make everyday count. Meet community members, have dinner with them, and put yourself in those uncomfortable situations because that is how you will learn the most.

Trenton Bricken

Rasheca Longendran (Duke '20)

This summer I taught Rhetoric at SCFP and an "Engineering Design" elective at SCFP. During our week at Ole Miss I taught a Scratch class with Aakash. As I was one of 3 TA's, my primary goal during class, especially during the 8th grade class for which I was the head TA, was working at the tables with the students and conducting small group discussions. Closer to the competition, I worked with the 7th grade students and coached impromptu speaking.

Especially for scholars working at SCFP I would suggest that they be prepared for a jam packed summer of fun and information. Although we worked relatively long hours, it is definitely manageable but I think the SCFP interns need to be aware of time management in trying to ensure that they balance sleep, work, and socializing with the other scholars. One of my favorite parts of the summer was learning about the other scholars so I would definitely suggest trying to have inclusive activities to promote sharing.

I also would suggest that the SCFP interns be prepared to be very organized and have work to take home. With the lesson plans and the grading we needed to do sometimes we would stay after the students left to finish our work or take it home with us. I also suggest that other scholars try to explore more within SCFP. Schedule a dinner with Kate (or the executive director) or during your free period (if you have one) see if there are other things you could help out with at SCFP. There is always a lot of work that needs to get done there and I think the staff really appreciates the help and you get to learn more about the organization by being inquisitive and trying to expand your role.

This is also something that might seem minor but I think setting a house precedent of keeping small things small and addressing them as they begin is of importance. I think towards the end of the summer it got a tad bit tense as problems that had grown over the summer were not properly addressed at the start.

Aakash Thumaty (UNC '20)

Ray Pryor (Duke '19)

I worked as an English teacher for rising 7th, 8th, and 9th graders at the Sunflower County Freedom Project in the Mississippi Delta. I lived in Cleveland, MS and worked 30 minutes away (by car) in Sunflower, MS.

Rohan Sheth (Duke '19)

At the SCFP I served as part-time math teacher to rising 7th and 9th graders and part time camp counselor. After receiving two weeks of intensive teacher training, Scott and I worked to develop the math curriculum, compose daily and weekly lesson plans, and then actually teach math for five weeks. During those five weeks we worked intensely--almost 12 hours each day--but I had one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Students that we worked closely with for those five weeks showed considerable improvement both in character and in academic

performance. After the five weeks of "Freedom Summer", we all went on two camping trips to civil rights sites across the South--from Little Rock, AK to Birmingham, AL--with the students. We had an amazing experiential learning trip as we witnessed where monumental civil rights inflection points occurred in the 1960s in the South. Our summer concluded with one week at the University of Mississippi where the students had a full-on college immersion experience. As teachers, we taught self-designed college seminar classes, lived in dorms, attended workshops, and we even ate in the dining hall.

The SCFP program is where you will have (by far) the most impactful, raw, and transformational community summer experience. No other community summer location or job can guarantee you such an eye-opening experience. If you're looking to fly through community summer, do NOT choose this program. Despite the long hours I absolutely loved my experience. I was thrust into a community directly impacted by race relations, income inequality, and school segregation. If this interests you, please reach out to me--I LOVE talking about my experience.

Even aside from the actual internship, I learned so much about the deep and rich culture of Mississippi and the South. Whether with other scholars or with the Freedom Project, I was able to visit Memphis TN, Nashville TN, Little Rock AK, New Orleans LA, Jackson MS, Vicksburg MS, Yazoo City MS, Birmingham AL, Montgomery AL, and even more places I can't remember off the top of my head. Take advantage of your short time with community summer and travel as much as you can.

Scott Emmons (UNC '19)

6:45 - 7:15: commute to SCFP

7:15 - 8:15: prepare to teach as students arrive at the building

8:15 - 8:45: morning meeting with the students ("silly something", sing, life skills education)

8:45 - 12:00: teach three, one-hour classes

12:00 - 1:00: lunch. this is not off time! engaging students is key

1:00 - 2:00: teacher prep time

2:00 - 3:00: study session during which students have work time and teachers assist as needed

3:00 - 4:00: fitness! be prepared to exercise outside in the MS Delta heat

4:00 - 4:30: afternoon meeting with the students, similar to morning meeting but wrapping up instead of opening up the day

[4:30, 7:30] - [5:00, 8:00]: commute home whenever you finish lesson planning and grading

I anticipated classroom teaching to be the biggest part of the job at the Freedom Project. I was surprised by how important it is to be a mentor to and to build relationships with the students at all times. Furthermore, my idea of classroom instruction - a college lecture - was radically different than teaching underperforming middle school students who cannot listen to a teacher talk for more than five minutes at a time. Managing discipline and logistics in the classroom is as if not more important than the content of the class. The job is also physically demanding, including exercising with the students outside in the heat of the MS Delta and going on camping trips.