Racial Pluralism
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My PURM project, under the mentorship of Professor Quayshawn Spencer, focused on philosophy of race, which required both qualitative and quantitative research. Professor Spencer is coordinating and contributing to several projects in the field of philosophy of race: editing a volume on race and medicine, writing a co-authored monograph on the metaphysics of race, writing a single-authored monograph on the metaphysics of race, and writing a journal article on race and biology. The volume on race and medicine, as well as the journal article, focuses on large questions such as whether race should be used as a variable in medicine and if so, in what context and to what end. The metaphysics projects are more abstract in nature, dealing with the first principles of race. Is race real? If so, is it biologically real, socially real, or some combination of the two? These are the questions philosophers of race, such as Professor Spencer, seek to answer. My role in these projects was to edit these contributions, both those from Professor Spencer as well as from other academics, for clarity and accessibility as the calibrating average philosophy student. I also did extensive data collection and analysis on the use of race in college applications and demographic breakdowns, as a way of providing quantitative evidence to support Professor Spencer’s arguments about the way we talk about race in the United States.

When I told my friends and family I was participating in a philosophy research assistantship this summer, they jokingly teased that my research would just be thinking really intensely. And before I started work on this PURM project, I was not exactly sure if they were wrong. But working with Professor Spencer this summer has showed me the richness of research in philosophy. Our work was heavily interdisciplinary, drawing extensively on biology and sociology in order to support philosophical arguments. Although many think of philosophy as the study of abstract concepts, I learned this summer that the work we did strongly translates into impact on the ground. The use of race in
medicine, for instance, heavily affects a doctor’s ability to know whether a certain illness or other medical phenomenon is more likely to afflict a certain patient. The use of specific race options in a School A’s application form as compared to School B’s may deem a student eligible for affirmative action at A but not B.

As a result of this summer, I am now more confident than ever in my plans to major in philosophy, for which I cannot thank the PURM program and Professor Spencer enough.