Public Schools as Loci for Human Experimentation
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This summer, I completed my Health & Societies honors thesis research, funded by the Ruth Marcus Kanter College Alumni Society Research Grant. My thesis examines the use of public schools as loci for vaccine trials during the early- to mid-20th century. I argue that the use of schools blurred the lines between human experimentation and vaccination campaigns. But I also note that the use of schools varied widely from 1920 to 1970, and the public’s perception of these trials in turn varied, depending on the place and role of schools in society.

I used these funds to travel to archival sources in New York City and Philadelphia, namely the NYC Municipal Archives, the American Philosophical Society, and the College of Physicians Historical Library. I found that, in most cases, archival research is a slow process, as only a few documents out of hundreds or even thousands may be relevant and useful to one’s research question. Nonetheless, given how tedious the process sometimes is, finding useful information is that much more exciting.

Working on my thesis has gotten me much more interested in research in the history of medicine and bioethics. Indeed, my experience thus far researching and writing the thesis is largely what has motivated me to apply to fellowships for graduate school next year. I have found that I very much enjoy research and making original contributions to the scholarly discussion. Furthermore, this research has caused me to pose additional questions that may be the subject of research in the future.