Languages of Sustainability
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As someone who spent practically my entire life in the United States, whenever I used to hear the word "sustainability," images of recycling bins and trees used to immediately fill my head. I often associated the concept of sustainability with environmentalism but little more than that; that all changed though this summer, as I had the opportunity to work with Professor Simon Richter on a research project entitled “Languages of Sustainability,” which aims to go across fields and gather data on the conceptions of sustainability in different cultural and linguistic contexts. It turns out that the idea of sustainability actually means many different things to different people, whose interpretations of the word can go beyond simple environmentalism and the literal ability to be long-lasting and instead trace back to the very roots of their languages and traditions.

My work with Professor Richter this summer involved helping to create questions on the initial surveys that we used to gather data alongside the other researchers on our team, and then of course actually administering those surveys to a wide variety of native speakers. Focusing in specifically on Latin and South America as well as South India, I had the opportunity to connect to and survey experts in academia, policy-making/government, and NGO-related work in those areas of the world, seeking to gain a more varied and nuanced understanding of sustainability across many different fields and in over twenty individual countries and a number of languages.

On my end of the research, one of the really big questions that came up was the perception of sustainability by indigenous cultures and the practices that stem from these groups. We initially encountered great difficulty gathering data on the languages spoken by these groups as well, but we were able to find avenues to eventually gather more data in this area. Going forward, I am excited to explore them further. On that note, I am excited about the project as a whole, and the fact that I have the opportunity to stay involved. As we continue to gather more data, I am looking forward to learning more about the origins of words surrounding sustainability, especially those words which seem like they are similar or alike but actually have entirely different roots.

While I cannot quite say by any means that I have emerged from this summer with all the answers, I have learned that research is above all a process—an exploration that often leads to more roads than it does a destination. But it is a journey that is undoubtedly worth the trek. Mine so far has
taught me much about the nature of qualitative research, teamwork, and pushing on even when you are frustrated. And it has instilled within me a greater cultural sensitivity to the many different perspectives that shape discourse and perceptions across the globe.