I cannot speak highly enough of my time in South Africa. As my first substantive international experience, it gave me perspective, experience, and unforgettable memories that have shaped who I am today. I spent my time there interacting with people at extreme ends of the socio-economic spectrum and understanding how they fit into the larger environment of modern South Africa. I am thankful for the opportunity to spend a month backpacking across the entire country and soaking up the diverse cultural experiences that the countryside has to offer. I also had an incredible experience working with the laborers, farmers, executives, and fellow team members to understand my internship host company, ZZ2.

For some background, in the summer of 2011 I traveled to Mookesti, in eastern South Africa, as part my international internship for the IARD program. While there, I worked with ZZ2, the largest tomato grower on the continent to observe their operations and provide insights for potential improvement. The team consisted of myself, Julio Pachon, a Plant Science major, Peter Narby, a Crop and Soil Science major, Christian Pulver, who was working on a Master’s degree, and Professor Janice Thies, who acted as the team leader. My role became defined as a business analyst where I worked heavily with the Chief Strategy Officer to develop recommendations for the company to become a healthier organization.

My exposure to Africa began before I even landed in the country. After I purchased my ticket to the Johannesburg, I learned that the company had decided to push the project back by
one month. I later came to learn that punctuality and stability are foreign concepts to South Africans. I decided to make the most of the situation and spend the month exploring the country. I landed in Johannesburg, which I equate to the Los Angeles of Africa because of its sprawling nature and juxtaposition of fabulous wealth and desperate poverty. From there I headed to Cape Town, Port Elizabeth, Durban, and all points in between. I had the opportunity to dive with sharks, bungee into a canyon, surf famous waves, and immerse myself in all things South African. The diversity within the country left me in awe. Within a few hundred miles South Africa has cosmopolitan cities and tribal lands, ocean cliffs and sprawling savannahs, colonial mansions and township ghettos, even Great White sharks and penguins. The month I spent backpacking afforded me the opportunity to understand the social, political, economic, and historical contexts in which South Africa operates today. I visited the Apartheid museum that commemorates the death of an innocent boy which catalyzed the movement and stayed with jobless squatters in the Soweto township ghetto that still surrounds the area. Historically, traditional African ways were supplanted by Dutch and British colonialism which transformed into the Apartheid era. Today, the frustrations of the past 100 years have come to shape the post-Apartheid, black-controlled government. Wealthy and previously powerful Afrikaners (white Dutch colonialist descendants) feel disenfranchised by the newly-powerful black government, a dynamic that came into play in the rural and conservative environment at ZZ2.

After developing a thorough context and, admittedly, having a ton of fun traveling, I moved onto my time at ZZ2. The company has a strong relationship with Cornell and especially Professor Janice Thies and we enjoyed an incredible level of accessibility within the company and to the resources they had to offer. We were hosted by a number of people within the
company who ensured that we had access to exploring the various facilities and actors within the company while ensuring that we were having a rich and immersive experience. We stayed in a hunting lodge in one of their game preserves which was an incredible experience in itself. Cape buffalo, giraffes, and various antelope species became part of our commute on the way out of the preserve. In classic South African fashion, everyone went to great measures to make sure we were always full as well. I still miss mornings spent with our housekeeper cooking boerwurst (sausages), grilled tomatoes, and date pudding.

My first few weeks there were spent in a whirlwind tour of their massive operations in planting, caring for, processing, and marketing tomatoes and avocados. Their farm operations were truly world class and provided a case study of best practices for even the most sophisticated Western farms. Their seedling facilities were practically sterile and they dedicated millions to researching sustainable treatments such as compost teas, and plant extracts. It was challenging for me to develop recommendations for the company because of their level of sophistication. The internship provided valuable experience dealing with different cultures, working in a professional environment, applying classroom concepts to the real world, and understanding complex systems. I finished the experience by presenting business improvement ideas like crop loss insurance, commodity hedging, and additional processing plants to the board of directors of the company. The internship has proved to be invaluable to my endeavors since then. I have completed a number of similar experiences and I find myself saying, “when I was in South Africa...” Most importantly though, South Africa broadened my perspective of the human condition and made me a more conscious and well-rounded citizen of the world.