Interview with Keck Center Board of Governors Kate Castenson ’10

By Jessie Miller ’23

How did your internship experiences in college help you narrow down your career focus? How did you draw on the support of professors or research institutions in seeking out summer opportunities?

My internships during college were a really formative part of my experience. I was fortunate to have a few different internships, almost all of them with non-governmental organizations. After my freshman year, I interned with my local Red Cross chapter. During my junior year, I had an internship with a grassroots human rights organization in Buenos Aires during my time studying abroad. I also interned with the Washington Office on Latin America. I was energized when I could bring attention to human rights issues. That is why I decided to pursue a career in human rights and humanitarian work. Those internships were influential in my career choices later on.

As I hope all CMC students know, the research institutes are such great resources for funding. I received funding for one of my internship experiences through a research institute, and I also got some support with writing a research paper based on my experience. It is a wonderful opportunity for you to get that extra support, not just financial, but also academic. Institutes can help you make the most of your internship opportunities. My professors were also supportive in helping me make connections between what I learned in my internships and what I ended up focusing on for my senior thesis. The six months that I spent with the Washington Office on Latin America in D.C. were instrumental in helping me think about the issues that I wanted to examine in my senior thesis. In fact, the project I did during that internship ended up serving as the basis of my thesis. I wrote on the expanded role of the US military in areas that used to be more of the purview of the State Department or the U.S. Agency for International Development. My professors helped me make some of those connections and think through how to leverage the internship experience for a thesis. Internships are a wonderful way to gain both practical experience and to explore potential career paths.

What drove you to work in the NGO space? What unique benefits and challenges arose in your work at a variety of NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Mercy Corps?

I was drawn to working in this space because I have always felt energized by the mission-driven nature of the organizations where I’ve worked. NGOs provide a unique working environment where you can have quite a lot of intellectual freedom to advocate for issues that matter to you. For me, one of the greatest privileges of working for NGOs has been the opportunity to learn from people who were directly affected by the issues I am working on. When I was at Human Rights Watch in their Arms Division, I had a chance to interact with people who had been impacted by the effects of the weapons we were seeking to ban. Their personal stories of resilience were what inspired me to continue advocating for restrictions on these weapons, and not make compromises that would create loopholes for their use. At Mercy Corps, where I
I currently work, I feel energized when I am able to visit our country teams and ensure that the guidelines my team is developing, to help them be better prepared for humanitarian contexts, are really suited to the challenges they face. I view it as much more of a collaborative relationship.

One challenge that I have encountered throughout my career is that there are times when you are constrained by politics. This can be frustrating because it can inhibit you from achieving your goals. When I was working at Human Rights Watch, we saw an opening to push the Obama administration to join the Mine Ban Treaty and the Convention on Cluster Munitions, and to have more of a progressive voice on other humanitarian disarmament treaties and agreements. Unfortunately, we did not achieve all of our goals. NGOs can be ardent advocates for policies that protect human rights, but in the end, it is states that have to pass laws and sign the treaties to commit themselves to upholding these rights. It can be challenging from a personal standpoint to care so deeply about a topic and feel like you are unable to make as much progress as you would like because of political roadblocks and setbacks from administrations which come and go. You can have very different policies every four years with the US presidential cycle. Those NGO advocates are still there fighting on the sidelines, and sometimes they will find a more receptive ear with certain governments. It has never been a deterrent to me working in this space, but it is definitely something to be aware of if you are going into the NGO sector.

**Why did you decide to attend graduate school? What advice would you give a CMC student who is considering going to graduate school straight out of undergraduate versus seeking a job? How did you decide it was the right time in your career to return to school?**

After several years of working at Human Rights Watch, I decided to attend graduate school at the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at the University of Denver. I knew that I needed additional research skills if I wanted to take on roles with more responsibility. I chose a program where I could study international human rights and take classes in both qualitative and quantitative research methods. I was excited about the Korbel School’s Human Trafficking Center, as well as a wage-theft research program, because both of these were opportunities to apply research skills to solve pressing human rights problems. For any undergraduate considering going directly to graduate school, I would recommend waiting at least a couple of years. It is important to confirm your interests and also to determine what skills you would like to hone during graduate school.

It was only after spending several years working that I felt like I needed some additional qualitative research methods skills or quantitative skills to build on what I had learned at CMC. I also had more of an idea about what issues I wanted to focus on. Even though those ideas could change after graduate school, I think it is more beneficial to wait a few years because it enriches your experience as a graduate student. When you are engaging in discussions with your peers, you are going to be able to draw on not just your academic knowledge, including from your time at CMC, but also from your practical experiences. You are going to add more to
the discussion, and your fellow students are going to appreciate that. I also think that if you have several years of work experience, it makes you a more competitive applicant, especially for some scholarships which look for students who have gained experience in their chosen field. Of course, there are exceptions to this, but for me that ended up being the best decision.

What was it like to intern in Geneva, Switzerland? How did your time abroad inform your interest in working in the international arena? What advice would you give students considering where to study abroad?

I will talk a little bit about my experience as an undergraduate studying abroad in Argentina during my junior year in addition to my time in Switzerland as a graduate student. My first piece of advice is to seek out programs where you have a chance to take courses where there are predominantly local students, or at least where you are going to be exposed to students from different countries. During both programs, I took courses at a local university, which became a highlight in my experiences. Studying in another country’s educational system is one of the best ways to gain insight into its culture and history and see how young people view the world. In Geneva, it was really refreshing for me to be one of the few Americans in my class and hear other perspectives on global affairs. I would also recommend choosing a program where you can speak the local language as much as possible. I attribute my fluency in Spanish to the opportunity I had in Argentina to live with a Spanish speaking family and take courses conducted in Spanish. I did not have the same opportunities for the Geneva program, where the courses were in English. Unfortunately, that meant I did not develop as much fluency in the language there.

It is important to think about what culture you are interested in learning more about, and to use that as a guide to influence your study abroad choices. One of my CMC professors once told me that he thought students worry too much about strategic places to study abroad based on whatever the political challenges of the day were. I think you are going to enjoy your career more if you focus on areas where you are intrigued by the history, culture, language, and politics. Current events are important. But that is just one piece of what it is like to be in that country and to work on issues that are important there. Since I have graduated, the places that were popular with students are still important, but now there are other areas that seem to be of more strategic importance. It is important to follow where your broad interests are. That is going to make it possible for you to work in that place in the long term because you will enjoy the culture, history, and language, in addition to the political side.

You have worked on many topics including disarmament, humanitarian action, and human trafficking. How have you leveraged your wealth and diversity of subject matter expertise as you navigate your career journey?

In my career, I have tried to embrace the importance of developing transferable skills, like the ability to express ideas clearly and succinctly in writing, to work collaboratively across teams, and facilitate participatory discussions. It is really important to know how to translate these skills across different types of jobs. For example, the focus of my current job has been leading an
online training program for people who are at the beginning of their humanitarian careers. This involves distilling information into a few key lessons and designing ways for program participants to understand the information and to put it into practice. The skills that I have gained as a facilitator with this program may help me in a variety of roles, including research and advocacy. It is really important to view any career or internship experience as an opportunity to build those transferable skills. Experience with an advocacy campaign at Human Rights Watch allowed me to work with local civil society groups. This has really helped me during my time at Mercy Corps by showing me how to bring people together. Understanding how to develop equitable partnerships is really important.

Rather than getting too worried about being siloed, try to think about how you can build skills to use in another job. Many careers today value the experience of generalists who know about a variety of topics and have transferable skills sets. This background helps you succeed in a world of increasingly complex problems that we are facing in international relations and international human rights. It is important to be able to think critically about issues and to look past some of the conventional narratives in order to understand what is really happening. CMC prepares every student to think critically, write well, develop their own ideas, and question the conventional wisdom. I will always be grateful to CMC for this and I encourage everyone to highlight these skills as they go out into their first job.