I arrived in Lima, Peru on May 6th, 2015 and arrived at the project site, San Marcos, Cajamarca, the following day. I stayed at the research center of the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute (STPHI) and Universidad Peruana Cayetano Heredia (UPCH) research partnership for three and a half months to work on my practicum project exploring infant feeding practices in the region. To carry out my project, I collaborated with the UPHC-STPHI research partnership, which aims to bring international and local students to San Marcos. The UPHC-STPHI partnership is conducting a study, led by the Principal Investigators Dr. Stella Hartinger (UPCH) and Dr. Daniel Mäusezahl (STPHI), which I worked alongside of.

Prior to my arrival, I had consulted with my practicum supervisor, Dr. Valerie Paz-Soldán, and Dr. Hartinger to create a plan for my project, but I lacked a contextual understanding of the community in which I would be working. Immediately upon arrival to San Marcos, I visited a local community that was participating in a pilot project of UPCH-STPHI; this visit allowed to get a first-hand idea of the local population. After consulting with Drs. Hartinger and Mäusezahl, we finalized the approach of my research project. I would no longer include an environmental observation component, but instead would conduct an in-home observation; a questionnaire to complement the observation; a 24-hour dietary recall of the infant, as reported by the mother or caretaker; and a weighed meal intake of the infant. Although this re-focused approach was different than my initial plan, we concluded that it was more contextually
appropriate and would produce more robust results by allowing for comparison between the observed and reported. Furthermore, the data collection activities of my project were added to the consent form of the UPCH-STPHI study; my project would provide additional baseline data of a small sub-sample of the UPCH-STPHI study participants. Working alongside UPCH-STPHI study in this way provided me with greater access to participants, as well as ethical approval from the UCPH IRB that was reviewing the UPCH-STPHI study.

I began revising the Tulane (TU) IRB package and developing the data collection materials. After many revisions to data collection tools and consultations with the research personnel, I submitted the TU IRB package on June 15th. On July 7th I received the approval letter from UPCH IRB and submitted it to TU IRB. On July 8th I received notice from TU IRB that I would need to obtain an Institutional Agreement from UPCH IRB so that TU IRB could defer approval to UPCH IRB. With assistance from Dr. Paz-Soldán, we submitted the requested documents on July 8th and on July 27th we received response from TU IRB requesting the final signature from UPCH IRB. However, the entire UPCH was on holiday that week due to Peru’s national Independence Day on July 28th. Furthermore, transitions in UPCH IRB leadership and the generally long process to get things signed in Peru led to further delays in obtaining the final signature. On August 4th, I requested approval from TU IRB to begin data collection and received an “Acknowledgement” from TU IRB the same day to begin data collection with the understanding that I would submit the final UPCH IRB signature when I received it. I traveled to Lima from San Marcos on August 11th and on August 14th, the day I returned to the United States, I received the signature from UPCH, which I submitted on August 27th.

The IRB delays prevented me from carrying out data collection or data entry myself, but these changes to my original plan, although frustrating, created learning opportunities. To carry
out data collection, I trained a local woman who had previously worked with the UPCH-STPHI research team. Additionally, I learned how to create a data entry application using Census and Survey Processing System (CSPro), a free software developed by the U.S. Census Bureau and ICF Macro with funding from USAID. CSPro is used for user-friendly data entry before data is exported to a more sophisticated statistical package, such as SPSS, for analysis. I also trained a local research personnel in data entry using CSPro. Learning these new skills—training research personnel and overseeing the progress of a research study—was unexpected yet a valuable professional development opportunity for me.

Data collection commenced on August 10th; I observed part of this first day of data collection which allowed me to provide feedback to the data collector. The local research coordinator for the UPCH-STPHI study continued managing data collection for my project. We aimed to reach 24 households out of the ~300 that were enrolled in the UPCH-STPHI study. Data collection was completed at the end of September and was sent to Lima, where data entry will take place at UPCH. Currently, the data entry application is being tested and data entry will “officially” begin shortly. The data will be sent to me electronically, at which time I will be able to export the data to SPSS to begin analysis and ultimately draw conclusions.

The goal of my project is to collect baseline data of infant dietary intake, as well as identify current infant feeding practices and factors at the household level that affect ideal infant feeding practices, including water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) factors associated with malnutrition. The results will be shared with my practicum supervisor, Dr. Paz-Soldán, as well as Drs. Hartinger and Mäusezahl of the UPCH-STPHI research partnership and local research personnel. We plan to submit a manuscript for publication and will consider carrying out my project again next October as part of end-line of the UPCH-STPHI study.