While extensive research has been conducted on the various weaving methods and techniques that modern Guatemalan Maya women employ in their weaving process today, so far, little research has been done in regards to the ways in which the modern weaving styles and designs used relate to their ancient Maya roots. This summer (June-July 2015), the generous Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies/Tinker Grant allowed me to both gather data from stone and ceramic depictions of ancient women’s textiles from several museums in Guatemala City (the Museo Ixchel del Traje Indígena, the Museo Popol Vuh, and the Museo Nacional de Arqueología y Etnología de Guatemala) that are difficult or impossible to access and analyze from pictures in publications or online. Though I was not able to visit the archaeological site of Tikal this summer as stated in the grant proposal, the museum trips permitted me to take pictures of and notes on stelae and ceramics from multiple sites in Guatemala, including Tikal.

I was also able to visit several museums, like Cojolya in Santiago Atitlán and the textile museum in San Antonio Aguas Calientes’ Mercado de Artesanias to research the ways specific designs, colors, and styles of Guatemalan textiles today can often be linked to certain towns or regions of the country and can often be used to distinguish one person from another based on the town or region they come from. These textiles, especially the woman’s huipil (blouse) and corte (skirt) (both elements that originated in ancient times), serve to provide the wearer with a sense of identity; not only Maya identity, but a specific identity tied to birth town or town of residence. The information gained from all of these museums will be especially useful in further research on the ways in which modern textiles connect to their ancient ancestors.
Most importantly, the focus of my fieldwork this summer was to allow modern Maya women to offer insight into possible or perceived connections between modern textiles and their ancestors through ethnographic participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Much of this was accomplished over the course of about four weeks. I was able to complete fifteen audio-recorded interviews and participated in and filmed several sessions in which Maya women taught me to naturally process and dye thread and weave textiles on a backstrap loom. The interviews revealed modern Maya women’s thoughts and education on their craft and how it may relate to their ancestors. I learned that many of the materials and weaving processes have remained the same, but that colors, designs, and even style has changed and evolved in many towns. I also learned the perceived importance of each town or region having their own distinguishable patterns and/or colors in their traditional clothing and textiles, as well as gained some insight into why this phenomenon may have arisen and how and why it has changed in a relatively short period of time. In addition, learning the processes and techniques used from start to finish of preparing and weaving thread to producing a finished textile allowed me to better understand and connect with the sources I have to work with for my research.

The only major setback I encountered was that two weeks before I left Guatemala, my wallet was stolen and I was unable to travel after that point. Unfortunately, this meant that I could not complete the last five interviews I had planned. I also encountered more hesitation on the part of potential interviewees than I had anticipated (largely due to fear of having the interview recorded and having to physically sign a consent form), leading to a smaller number of total interviews. While the completion of these interviews would have expanded my research, the interviews, participant observation, and museum visits that the Stone Center/Tinker grant made possible for me to engage in proved extremely useful to my broader research topic.