The pre-dissertation research grant provided by the Stone Center for Latin American Studies funded major excavations in Plaza B at the ancient Maya site of Cahal Pech, near the town of San Ignacio, Belize. As detailed in my research proposal, the objectives of this excavation were to: 1) uncover deeply buried architecture dating to the Middle Preclassic period within the site core; 2) reveal larger portions of the site dating to this time period, in an effort to gain an idea of the usage of space and site organization; 3) recover a larger sample of Middle Preclassic artifacts that can aid in the interpretation of structure function; and 4) study the developmental sequence of Middle Preclassic architecture through the analysis of stratified deposits and building phases. Although the information recovered from excavations has not yet been subjected to detailed analysis, I can confidently say that all of these objectives were met, and in some cases expectations were even exceeded.

To address the issue of uncovering and documenting buried Middle Preclassic architecture, a large excavation block, initially 6 x 4 meters in area, was opened near the southern end of Plaza B. The placement of this block was determined by looking at evidence from the trench completed in the 2007 field season (also funded by a Stone Center grant), which indicated the presence of a Middle Preclassic platform in the area. Initially, the cobble-and-marl surface of the platform was found throughout the entire excavation block, and an extension had to be added to the northwestern corner to attempt to find the structure’s edge. This succeeded, and further extensions were opened over the presumed pathway of the platform’s edge, resulting in an excavated area of 49 square-meters. This large-scale exposure presented us with much more detailed information concerning the structure’s size, shape, construction history, and possibly function (pending further analysis).
The shape of this structure, temporarily termed 2009-Platform-1, was particularly interesting, in that it differed from the shapes of other excavated Middle Preclassic structures from this area. Previously documented Middle Preclassic platforms from the Upper Belize Valley have tended to have highly formalized shapes. These could be square (as seen elsewhere in Plaza B of Cahal Pech), rectangular, or rounded. 2009-Platform-1 seems to have incorporated both straight and round elements into its architectural plan; its northern edge at first appeared to arc from west to east in a relatively smooth curve, but began to take the form of a line as it bent back toward the south. The western edge, only a portion of which was located during 2009 but was likely seen in 2007, also seems to be straight. Along the eastern edge, an outset extension of finely-cut large limestone blocks was found, which were heavily covered in a coating of white marl. This seems to be a later addition to the platform, and may represent the addition of a “porch” or patio of some kind to the structure.

Four 2 x 2 meter units were chosen to penetrate 2009-Platform-1 to the level of bedrock, in order to search for traces of older occupation within the plaza. Resting on top of a paleosol layer, which represented the original ground surface of the plaza, excavations revealed an even earlier floor surface, designated 2009-Platform-2. This surface was completely different from that of the later platform, and has been tentatively dated through associated ceramics to the early facet of the Middle Preclassic. The placement of the later platform directly on top of an earlier manifestation demonstrates continuity in architectural location through time, as well as the development and evolution of construction techniques. The later platform appears to be larger and more complex than the earlier one, indicating an increase in architectural and engineering sophistication throughout the period.
Two additional 2 x 2 meter units were placed in the northern end of the plaza to investigate traces of architecture located there in 2006, but no further trace of that apparently rounded platform was discovered. Deep deposits were encountered, however, that were filled with ritually significant artifacts, such as ceramic figurines likely used in ancestor veneration rites. It is currently unclear what these deposits represent, but a major artifact analysis of their contents is planned as a part of my dissertation research.

In sum, the funding generously provided to me by the Stone Center for fieldwork this summer allowed me to conduct the excavations on the large scale needed to begin to answer questions of site organization and architectural development during the Middle Preclassic in this area of the Maya Lowlands. This has put me in a favorable position to begin analysis that will form the core of my dissertation, and for that I am incredibly grateful.