Utilizing funding from the Stone Center for Latin American Studies and the Tinker Foundation, the applicant was able to undertake a feasibility study for conducting dissertation research at the Preclassic Maya archaeological site of Paso del Macho, Yucatán, México. The summer research grant facilitated reconnaissance of the site and allowed the applicant to examine material (primarily ceramics and lithics) recovered from test pitting at the site in the early 2000s. In addition, the summer grant greatly assisted in efforts by the applicant to obtain permission from officials from the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia to conduct archaeological excavation at the site of Paso del Macho. Overall, the applicant has concluded that conducting dissertation research at the site of Paso del Macho is feasible, and that field research may commence as early as the summer of 2015.

Paso del Macho is located at the top of ridge between two steep hills, and serves as a pass to a fertile agricultural valley to the south. The site plan consists of six stone platforms arranged around a plaza. The principal mound defines the western border of the plaza, while a north-south oriented ballcourt delimits its eastern edge. With the exception of the ballcourt, no excavations have occurred on the visible architecture to determine their function. The site was initially discovered and mapped in 2001 during the inter-site survey of the Bolonchen Regional Archaeological Project. Ceramics recovered from test-pitting site support the presence of a Preclassic population at the site. Utilizing the ceramic chronology developed by Andrews V at
Komchen, it appears as though most of Paso del Macho’s ceramics date from the Early Nabanche (900-250 BC) to the Late Nabanche period (250 BC-AD 250), with abandonment of the site occurring around AD 250. Paso del Macho was most likely also embedded in a regional site hierarchy.

Visitation to the site occurred during the summer of 2014 made possible by the summer research grant given by the Stone Center and Tinker Foundation to the applicant. Specifically, grant money was utilized for airfare, lodging, and food. The grant was critical to conducting field reconnaissance at the site, as large tracks of the site had to be cleared from the surrounding low-shrub dry tropical forest in order to assess the preservation of the pre-Hispanic mounds at the site.

Field reconnaissance revealed that a local dirt road used as an access by locals from the nearby San Agustín ejido runs directly through the site. It appears as though the road has not damaged any of the pre-Hispanic remains, yet given the low visibility or even total invisibility of some archaeological features at the site, it is currently impossible to assess the impact the road has had on the preservation of the site. In spite of this, all of the mapped mounds at the site appear to be undamaged. Furthermore, it appears as though the site has not been looted of archaeological artifacts, nor have nearby ranchers or farmers taken cut stones from the mounds to use to build fenced enclosures. Site reconnaissance also revealed that the last excavators to the work at the site in the early 2000s failed to refill their excavation pits at the site, which is standard archaeological practice intended to mitigate the destruction of surrounding archaeological contexts due to the erosion that can occur around a test pit. As such, the applicant will most likely have to refill these pits in order to comply with standards of site preservation determined both by the INAH and by the Society for American Archaeology.
Field reconnaissance of Paso del Macho allowed the applicant to assess where and how excavations will occur at the site in order to obtain the proper data for a dissertation. The first objective is to assess the full construction sequence of the site: determining when each structure was built and how many construction sequences each building and the central plaza have. To accomplish this, several 2X2 meter excavation units will be placed near various mounds within the central plaza. As excavations proceed through the plaza, different floor and fill sequences will be uncovered, which in turn correspond to different construction sequences. Plaza units are typically the best for constructing the most accurate site-wide chronology as well. As such, ceramic material obtained from excavations within the plaza will be integral for determining when the settlement was founded as well as when it was abandoned. Following this, trenches will be placed on several of the mounds to assess their relation to the construction sequences evident from the main plaza. As of now, excavations are planned for the largest mound (Structure 1) at the site, as well as for one of the lateral structures of the ballcourt present at the site. Determining the association between the growth of the ballgame as an institution and the growth of other public architecture at the site will allow for a reconstruction of who participated in the ballgame as well as if it was associated with elite control and competition.

The aforementioned excavations will constitute the bulk of the applicant’s dissertation research. That said, additional research would need to be conducted at Paso del Macho to fully assess the extent of the settlement, its population, and whether or not it was only seasonally inhabited. In order to accomplish those tasks, surveys of the two nearby large hillsides as well as the fertile valley floor will need to be conducted. The later will most likely yield few results due to pre-Columbian and modern farming that have most likely erased any signs of ephemeral Preclassic habitation. Following the survey, a random stratified sample of the area immediately
outside of the architectural complex will be excavated utilizing 1X1 meter units. These test units are designed to uncover the vestiges of Preclassic occupation that may not be visible on the surface of the ground. Preclassic house mounds in many cases were arranged only centimeters above the ground level, and as such are vulnerable to being completely buried. Through test pitting, it may be possible to more accurately reconstruct the demography of this Preclassic site.

The summer research grant also allowed the applicant to examine the ceramics and lithic material recovered from Paso del Macho in the early 2000s. The overwhelming amount of the ceramics recovered from the site date to the Early and Late Nabanche phases (900 B.C.—250 A.D.), representing a nearly unbroken occupation during the Preclassic period. Following site abandonment, the site appears to have only functioned as a discard location for nearby travelers, as Paso del Macho is located at an important pass between several large hills. Due to a lack of Early Classic, Late Classic, and Terminal Classic material, the applicant is uniquely situated to assess a Preclassic occupation of a settlement without having to excavate through the architecture and artifacts of later occupations. This makes the feasibility of conducting dissertation research at Paso del Macho considerably higher.

The ceramics uncovered at Paso del Macho were examined using type-variety analysis, which is the standard mode of analysis in Mesoamerica and especially in the Maya region. Red wares (Joventud Red group), brown/tan wares (Dzudzuquil group), and black wares (Chunhinta group) predominate within the assemblage recovered from the site. The recovered ceramics are remarkably similar to ceramic assemblages from the northwestern coast of Yucatan, possibly indicating either migration or heavy interaction between the coast and interior where the Puuc is located.
A large amount of chert lithic and basalt lithic artifacts were uncovered from the site as well. The retrieval of large amounts of chert is relatively unsurprising. The Puuc region is renowned for its high quality limestone that is often associated with outcroppings of chert that can be expediently mined and flaked. In addition to the exploitation of local sources of chert, the inhabitants of Paso del Macho also utilized basalt. The pieces examined by the applicant did not appear to be fashioned into tools, but this may have resulted from their discard following the end of their use-lives.

The working hypothesis for the proposed study is that the ballgame at Paso del Macho was not associated primarily with elites, but was accessible to the entire population. With equal access to an activity at a scale beyond the household, community members would have fostered trust and cooperation through competition, either within a community or between them. Membership or association with a particular team served as a means of alliance building, which could serve as social “fallback” in times of resource scarcity, which may have been common considering the lack of hydraulic infrastructure at Paso del Macho. A lack of prestige items associated with the ballcourt and evidence for quotidian activities (such as lithic manufacture and cooking) in the surrounding area of the court would suggest that all members of society had access to the event. Furthermore, if the mounds in association with the ballgame show few signs of being associated with some kind of elite class, then we may expect that this was a more egalitarian oriented activity occurring at the site. An alternative hypothesis is that the playing of the ballgame actually underpinned status inequalities and regional site hierarchies.