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As a 2021 Burch Fellow, I traveled to Bristol, UK, to study school choice matching algorithms. When students are allowed to list preferences over schools and schools are given priorities over students, some sort of matching process is required to connect the two.

Specifically, I wanted to learn how the theoretical findings of economists from the US are applied to make the real world a better place. In rare cases, social scientists themselves do the work of bringing findings from the ivory tower to the rest of the world. In most cases, however, it falls to governments, firms, and NGOs to do the application and upkeep. While the “ivory bridge” might be a good fit for me, I sometimes find the formal education setting stifling. I can easily envision...

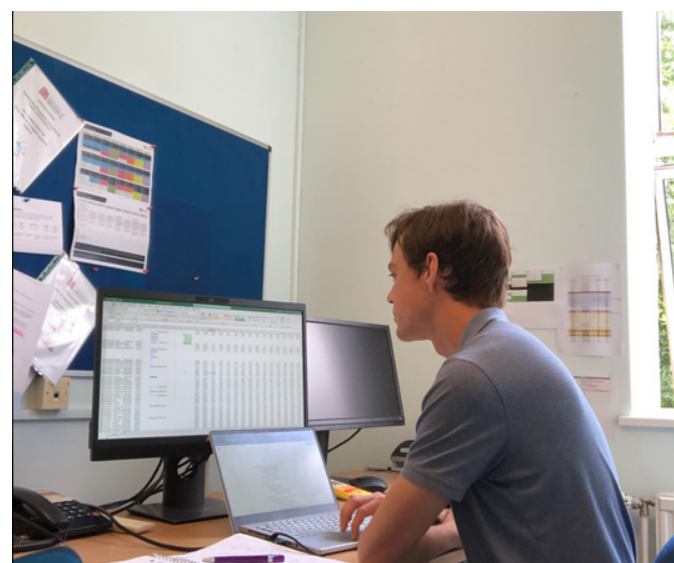
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Bristol, UK

a life exploring the forefront of academic knowledge, then distilling and applying the most impactful findings to the real world. This past summer was the first step in that direction.

Over the summer I had two goals. The first was learning about the matching process and the upkeep of the local systems. I conducted a series of interviews with local school administrators and discovered flaws that were not predicted by the matching theory. For example, when the rubber hits the road, parents still try to manipulate and game what are designed to be “strategy-proof systems”. Economists hadn’t put much thought into how to convince the actors in their models to act rationally.



Through these interviews, I also learned that the majority of administrators did not know much about the systems they were applying. I was initially disturbed -- how could these caring and competent people not be curious about the work they do? I reframed my view after considering how many miles I had driven a car without knowing how to do more than change my oil or replace a flat tire. It was unfair to expect these administrators to be social mechanics, but the niche seems more appealing to me than ever. The second goal was to gather data and set up a research study on the real-



world effects of the adoption of strategy-proof matching systems on student achievement. I collected the necessary data, paired some similar districts, and conferred with Bristol economists to ensure my design was sound. My goal was to come back to the States and write my senior economics thesis on the topic.

My plan was stymied when I learned about another group of researchers (from MIT and LSE) who were planning the exact same study -- From Immediate Acceptance to Deferred Acceptance: Effects on School Admissions and Achievement in England. They have since come out with a working paper on the topic. Second, my advisor for this project and my thesis told me he was leaving UNC and wouldn’t be allowed to work with me in the fall. While it felt at first like my work would be wasted, I was able to pivot to work alongside one of the LSE researchers on a separate project and have



since written two theses centered on the concept of bureaucratic discretion, the importance of which became obvious in my time in Bristol.

A less tangible but much more impactful result of my Burch experience is clarity for my plans post-undergrad. I came into UNC certain that I would attend law school immediately after graduating. In the latter portion of spring 2021, my junior year, I drifted more and more towards a career in academics. First, I considered a joint JD and MPP degree, then a Ph.D. in political science, and finally, pursuing an academic career in economics. The field is by far the most interesting to me, and the rigorous approach to social science has fascinated me since my first day in ECON 101. I never lacked interest in the discipline, only the confidence that I could participate on the same level as my professors.

Living alongside graduate students, working on my own novel research, operating with a high level of independence, and communicating with professionals in the field has made the profession seem truly attainable for the first time. In Bristol, I felt for the first time like a participant in my field in addition to a student of it. As I left, I realized that without the training, institutional support, or pre-established network, I had gotten to the same place as a team of professionals. I learned that I am made of the right stuff for this field.