

Megan Carter-Stone

A few weeks ago, my boss encouraged me to “soft code” data. I would have had no idea what he meant without being in the lab.

I joined SNaPP lab as a senior. I had worked as Professor Rapoport’s research assistant, but was replaced when I went abroad. I wanted to pursue political data jobs and needed experience in the field to do that. The lab was perfect training. Struggling with data is heart-wrenching. You have an idea about what you want it\* to do but your code doesn’t work so you fix it and fail again. So you google it and it still doesn’t work. Then you turn to your lab mates and they explain why it isn’t working and your code suddenly works and makes sense. The lab taught me this necessary resilience in data work. Working with data is a puzzle and solving it is a rewarding experience, but it requires patience.

I now am a Junior Data Analyst for TargetSmart Communications, a political data company. We perform polls and create and manage huge data set. While a private company, we serve many non-profits and political campaigns and is the largest supplier of data to the Democratic Party. I mostly do data processing. TargetSmart uses Alteryx, a super user-friendly data software (much much easier than R, which we use in lab), but one that still requires patience and an understanding of the ends and outs of data.

SNaPP Lab -- no doubt -- helped me get my job. In my interview, I talked about how I’ve learned to love the process of playing with data and described (without any spoilers!) the project I designed. From what I can tell, many students have internship experience, but working closely with a professor to design your own projects as an undergraduate, is unique to very few institutions and when available, often underutilized and underappreciated. I didn’t have cool summer internship in DC, but I had extremely relevant research experience and a passion for data.

The lab is hard. It takes a lot of time and you’ll think there’s way too much literature for a field that’s only been around a few years. But I miss it every day and I got to spend time with some of the smartest and most interesting students on campus. The work was worth it.

\*Academia is the only place where the word “data” is plural. In the business world, it refers to the entire set, so it’s treated as singular.