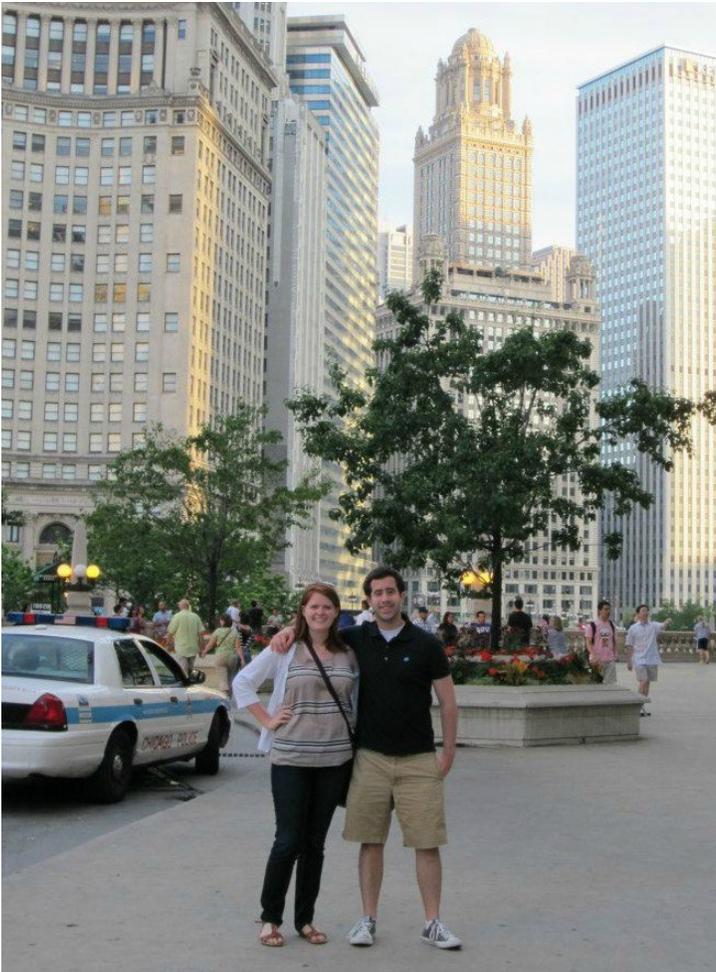


Opening New Frontiers: The Religion and Public Life Program visits Chicago

By Henry Hancock, Undergraduate Student, Rice University '13, Religion and Public Life Program Student Reporter



RPLP Fellows Virginia White and Henry Hancock in Chicago after a day of conducting interviews.

While many undergraduate researchers find themselves restricted to the lab during the summer, four Religion and Public Life Program (RPLP) team members spent a week in Chicago conducting fieldwork for the Religious Understandings of Science (RUS) study. A team consisting of Rice University undergraduates Kristin Foringer ('15), Henry Hancock ('13), and Virginia White ('13), and former RPLP Post-Baccalaureate Fellow Samuel Kye studied four congregations in the greater

Chicago area: a Reform Jewish Temple, an Evangelical Presbyterian church, and two Hispanic Catholic congregations. The team completed 14 observations and 24 interviews over the course of ten days, an intensive effort that involved many hours at various services observing congregational practices, meeting potential interviewees, and conducting interviews.

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For Samuel, conducting field research in Chicago was not only essential to the broader project, but also vital in enhancing the sociological perspective through exposure to less familiar contexts. “Given that Houston is in the southern beltway for religion,” Samuel said, “I think it was interesting for the students to get perspectives from a Midwestern city.” Reflecting on the experience of studying multiple Spanish-speaking congregations at once, Kristin said, “My observations provided insights into the perspectives of Latino Catholics.” Another fellow, focused largely on a local Reform Jewish Temple, was consistently impressed by the candidness of the respondents during interviews. “These congregants really thought this type of research was important,” he commented, “so they were willing to talk quite openly about their personal views.”

The students not only found the trip academically interesting, but also personally meaningful. Virginia noted that “Traveling and entering settings that are unfamiliar to me always challenges me to think more broadly.” The Chicago trip gave her an “outsider’s perspective” on a Protestant congregation that reminded her of the church in which she grew up. Her research experience gave her an opportunity to think about her own approach to religious dialogue. She felt that “this experience will serve me well into my future as I navigate a world where religious misunderstanding is all too common.”