Despite opportunities to explore hundreds of courses, multiple libraries and myriads of extra-curricular activities, Cokie Thompson says her most valuable experience at The University of Alabama took place 55 miles from UA’s campus.

Thompson, a senior from Memphis, Tenn., majoring in journalism, was one of six 2016 participants in the New College Walker County internship program. For the past six summers, students in the program have lived in Walker County, Alabama, interning for local nonprofits. Students can earn academic credit for their work through NEW 310, an independent study.

Thompson assisted Main Street Alabama, a nonprofit focused on bringing jobs and economic development to the state’s historic communities, with downtown revitalization projects in Jasper, the county seat. “A lot of the core tenets of the program – and the concepts of community development and nonprofit work – were things that I looked at and said, ‘That’s me,’” says Thompson, who was nominated for the program by a previous Walker County intern. “Even though before this I never would have considered working in a place like Jasper.”

According to the United States Census Bureau, 23.5 percent of Walker County’s 65,294 residents are impoverished, nearly twice the national poverty rate. Walker County has seen a 4.6-percent decrease in employment since 2013. The current unemployment rate is 7.2 percent, higher than the national average of 5.5 percent and the Alabama average of 5.7 percent. Between 2010 and 2014, 19.8 percent of the population under age 65 had a disability. Nonprofits in the county aim to promote civic engagement, health and quality of life for residents.

Five UA students spent six weeks in Walker County in the summer of 2016, each working 20 to 30 hours per week for local nonprofits. Since the program’s inception, students have spent more than 4,000 hours meeting civic, educational, environmental and other needs in Jasper and the surrounding area.

In addition to partnering with Main Street Alabama in 2016, interns worked for the Children’s Advocacy Center of Walker County, the 21st Century summer school program, Walker Area Community Foundation, Bankhead House and Heritage Center and the Walker County Health Action Partnership.

At their individual assignments, interns did everything from office work and reading to children to archiving local history and assisting a children’s therapy.

New College partners with the David Mathews Center for Civic Life and the Walker Area Community Foundation to structure, fund and organize the internship program.

During the spring semester prior to working in Walker County in June and July, students attend class twice monthly. Class assignments, readings and guest speakers provide an introduction to the principles of civic engagement and civic health and a look into Walker County’s positive aspects and struggles. Interns study Walker County, meet residents and leaders from its communities and create a county-asset map.

Emily Pickert, a senior from San Antonio, Texas, majoring in nonprofit management through New College, interned with Jasper’s Main Street Alabama organization in the summer of 2015 and returned to Walker County in 2016 as the internship program’s student coordinator. Pickert says the internship gives students the opportunity to participate in efforts run by passionate members of the community. “We’re not bringing a prepack-aged solution to anyone’s problems,” Pickert says. “We’re just saying we believe in your community, we see that you have ideas and we’d like to help.”

Pickert says the program is part of a long-term effort that relies on community residents as well as outside aid. “There’s no quick-fix problem in Walker County. If there were any, they’re handled,” Pickert says. “What’s happening is more of a fundamental change, and that can’t happen in a summer. It takes time. We’re just a part of that big thing that’s happening.”

Thompson and her supervisor, Mike Putman, worked to connect businesses and residents in downtown Jasper. Thompson describes a lending-library project as an example of this kind of collaboration. “The local newspaper donated old newspaper stands, a local car wash cleaned them up, a local artist painted them, the local car dealership put a sealant on the paint and a local glass shop placed the glass in front of it,” she says. “Then people would donate books. It was all locally done, and it was a cool thing to see.”

Five miles southwest of downtown Jasper, Matthew Zeliff, a junior from Atlanta majoring in community development and international studies through New College, spent his summer at Walker County Lake as an intern for the Walker County Health Action Partnership and United Way. Zeliff’s project aimed to improve lake access and promote recreation, particularly physical activity.

Zeliff says he arrived in Walker County with an interest in environmental health and nonprofit work and left with hands-on experience in influencing a community’s daily life and long-term health. “I would absolutely say that I learned more than I ever could learn in any class or any book or presentation,” Zeliff says. “Learning from people in the field who are more experienced than me and getting to see what those people thought and said and did – you just can’t replicate that in the classroom.”

Community partners, including Mike Putman of Main Street Alabama, say they value the interns’ ideas and youthful perspectives. “The University is sending interesting and interested people to Walker County, and I, for one, appreciate it,” Putman says.

The David Mathews Center organizes activities and internships across the state to promote civic participation. “If we’re not equipping Alabama’s next generation to do the work of citizenship and be active, informed members of their communities, we will never accomplish our mission,” says Cristin Foster Brawner, executive director of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life and the New College course instructor.

For more information about the New College Walker County internship program, contact John Miller III, assistant director of New College, at 205-348-2642 or mill031@ua.edu.