Imagine seeing two paintings at an art museum side by side. The painting to the left depicts a beautiful mountain, using black and white paint. The painting to the right depicts the same mountain, but unlike the painting on the left, it uses vibrant colors including yellow, orange, red, and green. While the painting to the left is indeed a wonderful piece, its narrow range of colors limits the depth it possesses. The painting to the right, on the other hand, is riddled with splashes of bright colors that combine wonderfully, creating layers of great depth. There is only so much that an audience can draw from the painting to the left due to its lack in depth. The multidimensional composition of the painting to the right, the one characteristic that separates the two paintings, invites the audience to think critically, to interpret what they see before them.

My hometown of Somerville, Massachusetts is one of the most densely populated urban cities in the United States, so while we do not have any mountains, we do have an incredible amount of diversity amongst our residents. For all of my adolescence, I took classes, played on sports teams, and hung out with people from Haiti, El Salvador, Brazil, Eritrea, Portugal, and Nepal, to name a few. It is because of this diversity, this variety of colors that Somerville represents the painting to the right. Spending my adolescence with these people who were raised in cultures so different from my own served as an education in itself, for it forced me to think more critically about the world around me. My adolescence allowed me to significantly mature by making me more conscious of the fact that everybody is different. It also exposed me to a variety of different standards of hospitality, humor, compassion, and sensitivity, amongst other aspects of social life.
I myself am a Cuban-American. My mother was born and raised in Havana, the capital city of Cuba. Her father (my grandfather), Rene Mederos, was a famous political poster artist. In 1969, he was hired by the Cuban government to travel to Vietnam to depict scenes of the war. Rene lived with both North and South Vietnamese villagers, painting what he saw unfolding before him. Much like the painting to the right in the museum, my grandfather’s style incorporated bright color schemes into overtly political pieces. His ability to beautify darker events in history allows his audiences to enjoy his work while critically interpreting the social impact of the events being depicted. It is the role of art as a lens of critical thinking regarding social issues that has inspired me to want to work in Vietnam.

My Sorensen project proposal is to hold an exhibit at a progressive institution in Vietnam of my grandfather’s work. His Vietnam pieces were exhibited in Vietnam soon after they were completed in the early 1970s, and have not been shown there since. Considering that it has now been over four decades since the exhibit was held, it is unlikely that younger generations of Vietnamese people are familiar with my grandfather’s work. It has also been roughly four decades since the war between the United States and Vietnam ended, so the younger generations of Vietnamese people may be unfamiliar with the history of the war. I believe that my grandfather’s colorful depiction of the Vietnamese war efforts can help build a more positive legacy of the war. In addition, I would incorporate into the exhibit a condensed, non-biased informational piece of literature regarding the historic relations between Cuba and Vietnam (which has mainly been an economic one), as well as the relations between the United States and Vietnam. The purpose of
including such literature would be to encourage dialogue amongst the Vietnamese people about their country’s history, as well as their future.

While the exhibit of Rene’s work would be the main focus of my internship, I plan on creating an extensive photographic documentation while in Vietnam, including my encounters with Vietnamese people and culture. I will mainly be capturing the reactions of people who are attending my grandfather’s exhibit, but to the extent that I can do so respectfully and with permission, I will also photograph the faces and actions of the Vietnamese people who share personal stories with me in conversation. Upon returning to the United States, I would tell the stories of the people I meet (with their permission) through my photographs while sharing my grandfather’s work.

Certainly, my project is an ambitious one with gaps that must be filled if it is to be carried out successfully. I have to learn how I will be accommodated, how I will work around the language barrier, and what studio space I can acquire in order to hold my exhibit. One way that I plan on addressing these gaps is by working closely with the William Joiner Institute for the Study of War and Social Consequences at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The Joiner Institute has done much work regarding war and social justice in Vietnam. So I plan to learn as much as possible from them in addition to conducting research on my own.

Each aspect of my project requires me to interact with a large number of people in multiple settings, which is exactly the kind of stimulation that has allowed me to thrive as both a student and an artist up to this point. I have always been extremely passionate about connecting with and helping others, but I did not know
how to apply this passion in an academic setting until recently. Last semester, I took Cynthia Cohen's introductory course for Creativity, the Arts, and Social Transformation. At that time, I was still undecided as to what I wanted to study, though I was confident that art would always be integral to my future pursuits. Professor Cohen's course solidified this notion, but more importantly, it showed me in concrete evidence through class readings and creative assignments that art can foster social change.

So with my passion for people and this newfound confidence in my own creative projects, I signed up this semester for the "Introduction to the Comparative Studies of Human Societies", taught by Professor Sarah Lamb. I immediately knew that I had found my field of interest in anthropology. I have quickly learned in Professor Lamb's class that the most important and exciting element of anthropology is ethnographic fieldwork. With this being an introductory course to anthropology, we study the practice only briefly. Before I travel to Vietnam if selected as a 2016 Sorensen Fellow, I would like to learn in far greater depth about the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. In order to gain this knowledge, I will be taking "Conducting Ethnographic Fieldwork: Methods and Practice of Anthropological Research", taught by Elizabeth Ferry.

While my grandfather has been my greatest inspiration as an artist, I did not get the chance to meet him before he passed away. Holding an exhibit of some of his greatest work would create a connection that has never yet existed between him and I. By sharing his powerful work with the people whose relatives he depicted, I
am optimistic that the experience will make Rene's, the people of Vietnam's, and my painting look more and more like the one to the right in the museum: layered.