While working as a research assistant at the Gordon Foundation last summer, I was tasked with putting together a conference on “regional governments in the Arctic.” In drafting a conference description and drafting a list of speakers, I noticed that there were few academics engaged on the topic. Despite Arctic subnational and regional governments being at the forefront of changes in the region occurring as a result of the warming environment, scant attention has been paid to the role of these governments in constructing and executing Arctic policy. In particular, I was surprised at the vast disparity in the quantity of literature between the hundreds of articles and a few books written on the Arctic Council, a forum for federal governments discussing Arctic issues, and the paltry three articles on the Northern Forum, a forum for subnational governments aimed at improving the lives of Northerners, despite both having been in existence for about 20 years. I was curious in exploring: What does the Northern Forum’s history and failure in attracting and retaining members say about subnational foreign relations in the Arctic? Why did Alaska, one of the founding members, withdraw in 2011? Under the supervision and mentorship of Franklyn Griffiths, I undertook the first critical scholarly examination of the Northern Forum, which was the most challenging, yet simultaneously rewarding, experience of my undergraduate career that also greatly developed my research skills.

As mentioned, the extent of previous research conducted was three academic articles, which meant that I had to embark on creatively finding more information. Despite using Booleans and synonyms for the topic in searches conducted on UTL and Google Scholar, I knew I hit a roadblock which I needed help in overcoming. I approached Nich Worby and Judith Logan, research librarians at Robarts, and set up research consultations in which they were extremely helpful in identifying new sources on Alaskan politics and history. Additionally, in examining “subnational foreign relations,” Nich assisted me in finding sources under different terms, such as “paradiplomacy” and “constituent diplomacy.” I accessed books on this topic in print and online through Robarts, Graham Library, as well as through inter-campus loan, and the UTL online system. In this preliminary search, I used the UTL Search, JSTOR, ProQuest dissertations, and Worldwide Political Science Abstracts. However, I quickly realized that these sources seemed to have a heavy Canadian bias to it, so I decided to conduct searches using the University of Alaska library system search tools. This was successful in identifying new US-focused sources, which were available through inter-library loan.

I concluded in my preliminary research that books and articles were insufficient for me to learn more about and break new ground on the Northern Forum itself. Firstly, while otherwise not particularly useful in identifying other print sources for my project, I found in the footnotes of the three articles that one had conducted interviews with one individual that worked with the Northern Forum, and sought to contact her. With the assistance of Sara French and Tom Axworthy at the Gordon Foundation, former premier of Yukon Tony Penikett, and Jessica Shadian at the Bill Graham Centre, I compiled a potential interviewee list of people who worked at or with the Northern Forum. Referrals from these individuals and others also provided me with an “in” to set up interviews. Additionally, I went to Facebook and
LinkedIn and looked up people who had listed “The Northern Forum” in their work experience, which allowed me to identify two of the most important interviewees of my project. Seeing that the vast majority of potential interviewees were located in Anchorage, Alaska, I successfully applied for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences’ Undergraduate Research Fund and travelled there during Reading Week. Interviews provided me with insider information of the organization’s failure. In total, I conducted 21 Skype, phone, and in-person interviews with individuals involved in or with the Forum holding positive and critical views of its existence. Due to the subjectivity of interview experiences, I cross-checked information with other interviewees, followed up with all of them, and sought out archival documents to ensure accuracy.

This trip to Anchorage was crucial to my examination since I gained access to the Northern Forum’s organizational documents and archives. With the help of Nils Andreassen of the Institute of the North, I became the first researcher to sort through boxes and boxes of completely disorganized records since Alaska’s withdrawal. These records included declarations, past project reports, and work plans. Due to the scant attention paid to the organization, I even had to break open a filing cabinet to access some of the vital pieces of information. These documents, spanning from 1979 to 2012, gave me insight into the activities of the organization at the time they were written. Furthermore, this allowed for a better balance of my research between the subjective experience of interviewees and the decontextualized information in the documents. Since none of this information was available electronically, I also scanned the documents as requested by the current Northern Forum secretariat and the Arctic Portal to contribute to the Forum’s digital archives.

My work in synthesizing and analyzing the vast amount of material generated from this research is far from complete, and my thesis lists a number of research gaps that still need to be addressed. With the encouragement of Franklyn Griffiths, my paper is highly interdisciplinary, blending political science in the theory of subnational foreign relations (Section I), history in examining Alaska’s withdrawal (Section II), and public policy in suggesting avenues for reform (Section III). As requested by the Northern Forum’s current executive director, I will be sending my paper to him for consultation during the organization’s ongoing reform and renewal. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity that was afforded to me through working on this project, and I am confident that these research skills will continue to be valuable to me as I continue my studies at the graduate level in UofT’s combined law and public policy (JD/MPP) program this fall.

(In case you are interested, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences News covered my research trip here: http://news.artsci.utoronto.ca/all-news/intl-experiences-undergrad-sheds-light-decline-northern-forum/)