Paladino and Company is a green building and sustainability consulting firm located in Rockville, MD. During the first term of my co-op, I worked as part of the commissioning (Cx) team. Commissioning is a service that ensures that a building’s systems are installed and operated correctly to meet the requirements of the building’s owner, to meet LEED requirements, and ultimately save energy. I worked on a range of different commissioning tasks for about 20 unique building projects, which included completing submittal reviews and design reviews of mechanical products, compiling mechanical equipment lists, calculating energy conservation measures and drafting energy audit reports, which involved a lot of energy use analysis. I also was able to aid in the process of writing, and then going to new building construction sites to actually complete, functional performance tests of mechanical equipment. One of my favorite parts of my co-op experience was that I had the opportunity to visit and actually see the mechanical systems of around a dozen different buildings (either those in construction or already existing) in the DC area.

At the beginning of my co-op I had very little experience with mechanical systems or the LEED process, so I read different books which explained the things that I would need to know. Most of the work I did required a thorough understanding of mechanical, and some electrical, drawings, so a member of the Cx team sat down with me and helped to explain the different symbols and where things can be found on any given drawing. The commissioning team is made up of three other people, and each of them often would give me different assignments, so when they asked me to do something I hadn't done before, they would take time to walk me through the process, and provide me with examples from previous projects. The training process wasn't just a one time or week long experience- I was learning new information and helped complete new things during each week of my co-op. I did have one specified mentor, who was extremely knowledgeable, helpful, and always more than happy to answer questions, but since I also got assignments from other members of the Cx team, I looked to them as mentors as well.

Since I study civil engineering, the work I was doing with Paladino didn’t match up very closely with my coursework at Cornell. Rather than looking at the structure of a building, as I would do in my civil engineering classes, Paladino analyzes the mechanical systems of a building. I did, however, get a really close look at the building industry through going to meetings and site visits with the Cx team. Although I wasn’t learning about the steel and concrete of the building, I learned about how the industry as a whole works- how to read an engineering drawing, how to interact with construction management, how to be a professional, and how important it is to form working relationships with people in the building industry. Something I definitely learned, and intend to work on in my next co-op term, is that asking questions is extremely important, especially with the incredible base of knowledge I have in the Cx team and in Paladino as a whole.
One of the great things about DC is that there's a lot of different intern housing (albeit typically expensive), and it's a very young city in general because so many people intern in the area. Rockville is a little bit outside of DC but I chose to stay in DC itself. I found a reasonably priced dorm-style building called Thompson Markward Hall, female-only housing right across the street from the U.S. Capitol, which is a 10 minute walk from 2 different metro stations. I do have a relatively long commute (around an hour from my front door to my desk chair), but it's really nice to live in the city. There are also a lot of colleges in the DC area, American University is actually really close to Rockville, and they have a pretty good housing portal on their website. Rockville is really metro accessible via the red line. I would definitely suggest trying to find housing that's on the red line itself, it'll make your commute a lot easier not having to switch lines. In terms of things to do in DC, I became really close friends with the other co-ops from Cornell working for a firm in McLean, VA. On the weekends, they would come into DC and we would go to the museums or walk the National Mall (we all took a tour of the Capitol and got library cards for the reading room at the Library of Congress one weekend). We also found a lot of different food festivals on the weekends. It's a really active place, there's always something to do, and it's usually metro accessible.

One of the best features of the job was that I got to be involved in so many different projects- I would rarely come into work and have the same task as the day before. There was also a constant flow of work, so I was never left bored. Another great part of Paladino is the work environment- everyone is really friendly and willing to help if you have a question about anything.

The only negative feature of my experience was that as I mentioned, Paladino is a company that specializes in mechanical engineering projects, so most of my work was disjoint from my civil engineering background, and it was overwhelming at first being thrown into a totally new type of engineering. But I think that feeling would come with any new real-world engineering experience. So even though the mechanical engineering aspect wasn't a perfect match for me, I still feel like I'm now equipped with an incredible amount of new, useful information.