I’m back at Smith, and I can’t believe how fast my summer with COLAGE went. It feels like it went by far too fast, yet it was far too full to be easily summarized. This summer was one of the most challenging, exhilarating, intense, and rewarding summers I’ve ever had. Working with COLAGE through the RRASC program was a valuable experience that I don’t believe I could have gotten anywhere else.

With COLAGE, I had three main projects that I worked on throughout the summer, as well as some smaller projects that I helped out with. My main project was helping organize staff logistics for the Family Week that COLAGE co-sponsors in Provincetown, MA every year. For this, I worked primarily with Bethany, the Program Coordinator for COLAGE. One of the first things I did was organize the staff list in a spreadsheet that became my main tool for the rest of the summer. Using the spreadsheet, I was able to keep track of which volunteer staff member had sent me the paperwork I needed, what house they were assigned to, if they were a new or returning staff member, what shirt they wanted, and other things like that. Besides keeping track of information and tracking people down if I still needed something from them, I worked with the other office staff members and the group coordinators to put together staff folders and binders. Even though there were times when I was ready to pull my hair out in frustration because people wouldn’t respond to any communications I sent them, it all came together quite nicely, and we had no major problems regarding staff logistics.
My second major project for the summer was helping Meredith, the Program Director, with the newsletter COLAGE publishes twice a year, entitled *Just for Us*. One of the first things we did for the JFU was to decide on a focus topic. I came up with a few suggestions and we discussed them at the staff meeting. In the end, we decided on using the topic of faith and spirituality as the focus of the latest JFU issue. Once we’d decided on the topic, I worked with Meredith to come up with a call for submissions, which we distributed through the Net News e-mail, as well as the COLAGE facebook page. I also sent out a request to two former COLAGE executive directors to do an interview with them. They both agreed, and I conducted an interview with one of them shortly before I left for Provincetown and Family Week. Out of everything I did for the JFU, the interview had to be my favorite part. The interview brought up a lot of issues that I personally feel as a COLAGEr in regards to religion and spirituality, including the feeling that my family is not accepted, the need to have some sort of spirituality, and how my family views religion. It was a little disconcerting hearing a lot of my thoughts and attitudes towards spirituality and religion voiced by someone else. There was a lot of information in the transcript, and I was afraid that when I edited it, I would accidently cut out something that would turn out to be incredibly important later on. I also looked for bits of information that could be used for the education and advocacy section of the issue. This meant looking for articles in places like the BBC and the Human Rights Campaign for LGBTQ milestones, as well as other random facts. The JFU wasn’t ready when I left, but I’ll be helping Meredith with some of the editing once all the content has been collected.
The last major project that I had this summer was finishing entering the lending library into the database that last year’s RRASC intern started. This was fairly straightforward, as she left clear instructions as to how the materials were classified, as well as creating a guide for identifying the color code she used for the different classifications. The only difficult part was when I had to figure out what to label the VHS tapes that only had sparse details as to their contents.

Besides my major projects, I also helped out when needed on other projects, such as making copies of scholarship applications for the scholarship board, making buttons for both Pride and Family Week, helping compile the music lists for the dances, as well as a variety of other little odds and ends. I liked working on the small projects more than the big ones, because all the interns would pitch in on the small projects that needed to be done, like having mailing or button-making “parties.”

Some of the skills that I used the most during my internship were definitely my communication skills. This ranged from sending e-mails to the volunteer Family Week staff to answering the phones at the office. I also had to communicate with the other office staff members to let them know what projects had been completed, what I needed help with, and to see if there were any projects that needed to be done. Although all my previous jobs had an emphasis on communication skills, I used them on a more professional and collaborative level at COLAGE than I had previously. At my other jobs, I mainly worked by myself, but with this internship, I was almost always working with at least one other person, which also helped develop my group skills. When I’m working on a project, I tend to prefer to work alone, since that way I only have to depend on myself and I don’t have to worry
about others not completing their tasks. I discovered early on that many of the habits I have when working by myself didn’t translate well to a group environment, and had to adjust. I think this was a good skill to work on, since I haven’t really worked in groups in college. With COLAGE, I also used my computer skills fairly frequently, as most of the work that we had to do dealt with computers, such as compiling staff data, researching facts about faith and spirituality, updating COLAGE's facebook page, and things like that.

My favorite part of this internship, besides meeting all the wonderful people who work with COLAGE from the office staff to the other interns to the youth themselves, had to be Family Week. Working in the office, I started to lose perspective about what COLAGE is truly about - which is empowering the youth and giving them a place where they feel accepted and valued. That week crystallized everything I've learned and experienced during this internship and I hope everyone else in the RRASC program has this type of “Ah-ha moment” that I did. Although there were certainly low points in my week, like the Field Day debacle, overall, I enjoyed working with the youth and giving them a safe space to be open about their families and what they were feeling. I feel like Family Week was the culmination of my internship, and the last three days I had in the office were simply to finish things up and were a little anti-climactic.

The end of Family Week did bring to light one of the problems I had with my internship. Having both Family Weeks be a little less than two weeks apart was certainly very stressful. One staffer did not handle the stress as well as she could have, in my opinion, and it affected everyone in the office. My work always felt like more of a chore
when people began to get stressed, and it took away most of my enjoyment. At the end of Family Week, at SFO on our way back, there was a verbal altercation between two of the office staff members. Although both apologized to those of us who witnessed it, and COLAGE engaged the two employees in mediation and conflict resolution, I was still slightly uncomfortable around the people involved for the last few days at the office. Besides that, though, I truly did enjoy working with everyone at COLAGE and learned a lot about running a non-profit with a focus on youth and social justice. I realized how truly blessed I was in regards to both how open my parents were about their relationship and how accepting my friends and community were. Out of all the people I worked with, my family was the most open and I believe that translated in to how my community viewed us. It was such a wonderful opportunity, getting to hear everyone’s story and learn from their experiences. This sharing of stories and experiences helped transformed this internship from something I had the potential to have some disconnect from after I finished to something with which I want to continue to be involved. Through interning at COLAGE, I’ve discovered an aspect of the LGBTQ rights movement that’s specifically for people like me, and I plan to stay involved as much as possible.

One thing that I wish COLAGE did more of, though, is policy work. I discovered during this internship that, although working at a local level does create change, it also reaffirmed my belief that I want to be doing policy work when I grow up. As much as I want to believe people can change if given the right education, I also believe that there are times when the government has to step in to protect the rights of its citizens, and I want to be the one working to create that level of change. Working at COLAGE this summer gave me a further insight into the rights that LGBTQ parents lack in the status
quo, and I believe that as a COLAGEr, I and others like me can have important impacts on legislation and policies that affect our families. I think working with an organization like COLAGE that does primarily outreach would give me a different perspective if I went into policy work.

If I were to have any suggestions for future interns at COLAGE, it would be to make the most of your time and remember that if you feel like tearing out your hair in the office, Family Week more than makes up for it. Also, be prepared for an emotional roller coaster, and don’t be afraid to talk to your supervisor about any problems you’re having. Everyone at COLAGE wants you to have an amazing time, and they won’t know what they need to do to make your experience better if you don’t speak up. Also, bring cookies to staff meetings. Everyone will love you.