My internship at CHAMP was an adventure this summer. I have a true understanding of what it means to work in a small grass roots organization. Community HIV/AIDS Mobilization Project is a very interesting networking project that works on bringing HIV/AIDS, human rights, and struggles for social and economic justice together. CHAMP had four staff members when I began there and I was working out of Vanessa Brocato’s (the Executive Director) living room. It was quite cozy; I worked on the red leather couch with a TV table as my desk when I was at the so called “office”, or worked from home. About two weeks in, I met Josh Thomas. He and I then moved into the AVAC office in the Gay Men’s Health Crisis Building. Ordinarily the lay out of the office is not that important but the chaotic nature of the work setting set the tone for a bumpy summer.

I worked on a few different projects this summer. My big project was working on a blog about health care reform. I did a lot of basic research and was on several conference calls with different HIV advocacy groups. The HIV community was seeking improved affordable access to comprehensive, quality care and increased funding for HIV/AIDS prevention, treatment and research. Much like the other social justice groups related to health issues, we tried to campaign and get supporters to contact the representatives. I wrote two blogs on health care reform matters. I really enjoyed working on health care reform. It is a major political issue right now. I was able to get a good understanding of what is going on in congress not only with HIV issues but also a more general perspective. I’m still keeping up on
what’s going on in health reform and trying to encourage people to contact their representatives. The next few months will be very interesting and if it hadn’t been for my blog posts I really wouldn’t have a good understanding of what all that meant.

I did some administrative things like ordering business cards and booking the venue and getting sponsors for CHAMP’s July Forum. CHAMP does monthly forums or panels on different topics. The one in July was called “Love and Justice in a Time of HIV/AIDS: The Current State of Affirming Faith Allies.” The panel mostly had religious leaders from different types of churches and religions speak about how they navigate advocating for HIV rights as well as having what people see as a more traditional conservative role of being a religious leader. I found the panel fascinating and it was nice to meet some of the people who CHAMP works with.

I also entered supporters into our database. CHAMP uses a program called Democracy In Action, which had some serious problems for the things we wanted to get out of it. I had to make several calls throughout the summer to try and get things sorted out. I tracked members to the newly launched membership program which was a steady project throughout the summer that culminated in the launch of the phone drive during my last week of work. The membership drive was the focus of the last two weeks or so of my project. I did most of the setup for the call drive. I wrote the call script for callers to use, compiled the list of people we were calling, and wrote the “1-pager” info sheet that we gave as a follow up to phone calls for interested people. I also made over 100 calls during my last few days. “How to be a
solicitor without coming off as a telemarketer” was certainly a new skill that I picked up.

Strategy Lab is one of CHAMP’S projects that I got very well acquainted with. It was started due to the lack of HIV/AIDS prevention networks and communications for all of the domestic groups. It is a list serve with over 150 people and a monthly conference call about different HIV prevention and related topics. The monthly conference calls work like a panel of speakers but on the phone. I typed up the transcript from the calls from the months of May, June and July.

The June call was about bathhouses and how they can be used as testing venues and areas for prevention education. While I think the discussion was fairly basic, I found it really interesting.

The July call was about a new prevention method called “Test and Treat.” The first person spoke about targeted HIV testing and the issues in finding successful programs. Increasing testing is one of many important effective strategies in HIV prevention. The major issue was around the balance between targeting high-risk areas/populations/groups without stigmatizing them. The other speaker discussed a paper addressing transmission rates from main partners in MSM (men who have sex with men) relationships. Main partner transmissions account for somewhere between 60%-95% of transmissions. I was somewhat surprised by how high this number was but after I digested everything the speaker said, it made a lot of sense.

People engage in riskier behavior because of the trust and intimacy they feel with their main partners, such as more frequent sex, unprotected sex and they report more high risk acts with main partners versus causal partners. The speaker stressed
the importance of respecting MSM partnerships as being on the same level of other combinations, like heterosexual relationships, in order to find effective programs to address these transmission rates. I really enjoyed working on the Strategy Lab. I learned a lot about all the topics that were discussed and transcribing them helped me really absorb the material.

I also typed up some notes for Laura McTighe from a meeting in New Orleans. Laura works on Project Unshackle, which is a program that focuses on the intersection of HIV/AIDS and mass-imprisonment. There is a very old law in New Orleans, Crimes Against Nature, which allows prostitution to be handled as a federal offence. This is incredibly problematic and hurting a lot of people who are already facing adversity. The notes from the initial meeting about the project were both disturbing and interesting. The crimes against nature law is creating serious problems, but it was really interesting to read the notes from a meeting with so many interesting and smart people and see how they are navigating solving this problem and creating a plan of action.

In retrospect I got to work on a lot of interesting things during my time at CHAMP. However, one of my biggest challenges at CHAMP was finding work that was fulfilling and productive. Most of the projects didn’t take me that long so while I learned a lot, I usually had some down time each week. CHAMP was going through some staff changes during my time there, some of my initial projects were no longer pertinent and it became difficult to find new ones to do. I sometimes looked up other ideas that were coming up in my research or conference calls to fill my time. I think that I could have been more assertive in finding new projects, but because of the
delicate nature of the way the staff changes unfolded, I didn’t want to cause any extra problems.

The brown bag lunch series in NYC was also really amazing. Most of the different RRASC sites hosted a lunch where we heard about what they do at their respective organizations. Each week no matter how much I did or didn’t do at CHAMP, there was always an awesome lunch that was incredibly interesting to go to. I also really enjoyed getting my weekly dose of regular reproductive rights stuff. One of the speakers said that she wished different social justice groups would start to work together. She was refereeing to sex education and people working with drug users. I have truly taken this to heart. The reason I am interested in working with HIV is because one is able to address a large number of social justice issues through this lens.

All the different opportunities I’ve had at Hampshire helped prepare me for my internship. Most of my class work has been related to gender studies, which gave me a good basis for working with issues relating to different populations of people, and of course all the writing I do at Hampshire has helped my research and writing skills. Being a signer for Third Wave, the feminist club at Hampshire, gave me great preparation to do some of the administrative things that I was doing for CHAMP. My work studying abroad also helped me get through this internship. I did HIV prevention in Costa Rica for my first semester abroad. When I didn’t have enough work to do there I started teaching English in the local primary school. I learned a lot of patience on that trip and it helped me keep all my days at CHAMP productive and away from the perils of solitaire and cyberspace. I also learned that I certainly
do not want to sit behind a desk for my future career. After this internship and my second semester abroad in Argentina, I think that I’d like to be a teacher. My 5th grade teacher was the first person to really inspire me with social justice issues. If I can do that for future students I would be very happy with that being my contribution to social justice activism.