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I’m glad to have had the opportunity to work at SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective this summer. It was very different from the working in the private sector which I have done for about five years prior to going off to college. Interning at a not-for-profit organization had a more rewarding feeling. Being part of this type of organization made me feel like I was doing something meaningful with my life to benefit the lives of many women across the country. The atmosphere at SisterSong was more personal. The benefit of interning in a small organization (with six workers total) gave me the opportunity to get to become a part of the team in more or less half the time it would normally be at a larger organization.

As an intern with the Advocacy and Membership Coordinator Heidi Williamson, I worked on the Mapping Project, aiding in the organization of the Southern Regional Conference on Reproductive Health Disparities, revamping SisterSong’s membership benefits package, and updating our membership organization database. I can’t say which project I like the most because they each helped bring out my creative side, and also helped me to build on my communication skills.

The Mapping Project became a visual manifestation of where SisterSong’s organization and individual members are located and where across the United States has SisterSong made an impact. It was a fantastic project especially working with the other Advocacy and Membership intern. Together we created a comprehensive and easy to follow guide by using a key chart to depict what each color and marker represents.

To begin the project, a map of the United States was pinned onto the peach wall.
Part I of the project was to indicate where on the map our organization members are located dating from 2003 to present. I grouped the years into twos and used a color of the sticker dots to represent each group as follows:

2003/04 – blue,

2005/06 – yellow,

2007/08 – green,

2009 – red.

For part II, the same procedures were used with the exception of using pins instead of sticker dots. And also, the locations of the individual members were color coded by region – East (yellow), Southeast (green), Southwest (blue), Midwest (white) and West (red). And finally for part III, the Impact Chart, I placed arrow stickers (with the name of the city on the sticker) pointing on the location of the city within the state where SisterSong has attended conferences in the past four years. This time, there was no need to group the years into twos. Instead, I used individual colors to represent each year. With that said, I used red arrow stickers for 2006, purple for 2007, blue for 2008 and yellow for 2009. To finish, a key chart was placed on the lower right-hand corner of the map for ease of reference.

Another major project was organizing the Regional Health Disparities conference to be held at the Loudermilk Center in Atlanta, Georgia from September 30th to October 2nd. This was a great way to enhance my communication skills. The other intern and I were responsible for the RSVP list. We were to research and add more elected officials who specifically dealt with reproductive health issues to the list for sending out more invitations. My supervisor wanted to make sure that we had reached
out to every elected official in the Southern Region to attend the summit. We were also in charge of the preparation and mailing out of the letter invitations to the elected officials and various not-for-profit organizations. A period of two weeks after, follow-up calls were made to the offices of both the officials and the organisations to see whether a decision was made on their attendance at the conference.

Entitled the “Urban Initiative for Reproductive Health: A Strategy For Change,” the health disparities conference is the first of its kind to be held in the Southern Region. Its goal is for “local advocates to support and engage their public officials to develop and implement city specific initiatives in their communities.” The Urban Initiative will be focusing on some of the following reproductive health challenges:

Family Planning and Abortion
Empowering Healthy Teens
Reducing Reproductive Health Disparities
HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections
LGBTQ Reproductive Health

The National Institute is going to work to expand the Urban Initiative by holding regional summits, providing financial and technical support for local policies and programs to improve urban reproductive health, creating the urban initiative clearinghouse - a repository of local reproductive health models and data, and convening an advisory committee to create a national urban agenda.

The summit is being hosted by SisterSong Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, Reproductive Freedom Project of the Mississippi American Civil Liberties
Union, and Planned Parenthood of South Florida. For more information on the summit, please check out www.urbaninitiative.org.

SisterSong is in the process of updating their membership benefits package and I was glad I was able to assist with this. Heidi and I met once before meeting with the entire staff to brainstorm. We were able to comprise two complete packages for individual members and organizations of color and for individual members and organizations not of color. The feedback from the staff was very helpful and we were able to come up with a more comprehensive list of benefits for each group to bring before the board.

And lastly, I worked on creating a excel spreadsheet of all the organisations that are a member of SisterSong. It took me about a week to complete. The list comprised of 88 organisations and for each organisation, its name, the name of the executive director, the address, telephone number, whether or not they are an ally or women of color organization, whether or not they are a membership organization and if they are, the number of members they currently have. The services provided (policy, advocacy/education or direct service), whether or not they have any chapters, if they are a state, local or national organisation, if they identify as a specific ethnic group, their areas of operation and lastly their website. The organisations were then grouped into three categories (reproductive rights, reproductive health, and reproductive justice) for ease of reference. This information was in preparation for SisterSong’s new database to be solely used by SisterSong.

I used my listening skills the most during my internship. Most of my work was dictated to me which helped me to enhance my listening skills.
With no prior experience working for a not-for-profit organization, I worried I would feel like a fish out of water. Having been born in the Caribbean also made me worried that I would not have been able to bring something valuable to the table. However, I was able to use that to my advantage! I felt comfortable bringing these issues up with my supervisor who then asked me what my interests were. Based on these interests, I came up with a project, a study on Interpersonal Violence against Women and Girls in the Caribbean based on a Reproductive Justice Framework. With the help of my supervisor, I was able to tie in what I’d learned from the Reproductive Justice 101 training into my project. I was enthused about doing this research as it enabled me to learn more about my ethnicity in the context of what SisterSong stands for. That gave me an opportunity to bridge the gap between women of color in the United States and women of color in the Caribbean.

The highlight of my internship would be the Reproductive Justice 101 training. It was a very enlightening and informative experience. I was able to learn more about human rights and the eight categories to which they are grouped in and why. For example, civil rights (as a result of the civil and human rights movement), economic rights (as a result of the labor movement), and sexual rights (as a result of the gay rights movement). I also learned that the declaration of human rights came about as a result of the holocaust.

The training included engaging exercises. In one of them, we were placed in groups of four and given a real life scenario and we had to name the elements of reproductive oppression and suggest some steps that the person in the story or someone advocating for them might take to obtain reproductive justice. The core principles of
Reproductive Justice are - the right to have a child, the right to not have a child, and the right to parent a child. Any individual that is met with injustices by laws or at the hands of other individuals who controls and exploits them through their bodies, sexuality, labor and reproduction are said to be reproductively oppressed.

The three most important characteristics that I have developed as a result of interning at SisterSong are passion, strength and determination. If you are not passionate about the work you are involved in, you will never be able to give it your all and/or have the drive to see it through. Working for a not-for-profit organization, you also need to have the determination for wanting to make a change. You must not give up no matter how many brick walls happen to be in your way. Having the strength to continue for the end result will make all your troubles and triumphs worthwhile. It will also change an individual and/or family’s life forever.

To make the most of my internship experience, I would have, in my down time, shown interest in the Communications side of SisterSong. Having a well-rounded experienced is far better than just sticking to what I was assigned.

One can never fully prepare for anything, but, what I’ve learned in the classroom did help me be better prepared for my internship. The most applicable of my courses was my anthropology and economic development courses. In my anthropology classes, I’d learned about language and culture of indigenous peoples. For my economic development course, I learned about economic, political and social strife of people living below the poverty line in developing countries. I felt compelled to do this internship to see how I can be a part of the process for the betterment of their lives.
Now that I’ve completed my internship, I was able to have a clearer picture of what my career path would be. Having had this experience, I’ve come to realize that no matter what career I choose, I can still get involved in the community. I can still volunteer, be on the board, go to workshops and conferences and fully engage myself in the various activities in the non-profit sector to help change people’s lives while empowering the many who are struggling with the day to day activities we are all faced with.

I’m happy to have done this internship. I feel compelled to return to Mount Holyoke and share with my friends what I’ve learned. I never expected to want to continue working in this field. My initial expectations for myself were to graduate from college and apply to work for a not-for-profit organization to stay connected to social justice work, but in the end I’ve realized that I can still be a part of the process without having to work for a non-profit organization. This flexibility will allow me to fulfill other aspects of my life without the guilt or the regret of having to choose between the two.

Overall, my internship experience was great! Though I expected to do more activities pertaining to the what SisterSong does rather than administrative duties, the opportunities never arose. I enjoyed the laid back, but productive atmosphere at the office. I felt more at ease especially to be myself. I have had the pleasure of working with some amazing, intelligent and talented women. SisterSong, being a national organization led by women of color, has a focus on Reproductive Health and Social Justice. It is an advocacy group which provides training on Reproductive Justice
Framework and a collective which is made up of other Reproductive Health organizations and individuals.

The information from the RJ 101 training has benefited me in so many ways. I learned that even though we may all have individual oppressions that may be based on our race, ethnicity, class or gender, we all have either one or more things in common that may not necessarily relate to race, ethnicity, class or gender. For example, I am a black Caribbean heterosexual woman. However, in the Caribbean (except for Cuba and Puerto Rico), I am unable to have an abortion unless it causes a health issue for me. This barrier to my right to decide whether or not I have a child is also shared by women in the United States.

For potential future interns I would say, be yourself. Don’t be afraid to ask questions and ask for more responsibilities. Show enthusiasm and go beyond the call of duty. Get involved in areas outside of your work duties. Be able to work efficiently and accurately on your own and most important of all, have fun! Learn and enjoy what is being taught to you.

SisterSong is dedicated to changing the lives of women of color across the United States, a movement that will continue to thrive because of other organizations such as The Osborne Association, The Women’s Fund of Milwaukee and Abortion Care Network, etc. working for the same purpose. With all the hard work and dedication of the organization, SisterSong will no doubt see an increase in the number of its members. I also see the organization reaching out to the states and maybe to the Caribbean Islands that they have had little or no contact with in the past. This growing organization will continue to get the word across so that every women and child of color will get to know
and exercise their rights and to also empower themselves in turn so that they may also join in the fight to better the lives of others. As for me, I know my work didn’t end at SisterSong. I wish to share what I’ve learned with my fellow mates at Mount Holyoke and get more involved with volunteer activities and student clubs whose purpose is to seek justice for all.

Blessings!