This summer I interned with Choice, USA in Washington, DC. It was great working in such a politically charged atmosphere (which happens to be my home city) with such an active and engaged staff and group of interns who clearly know how to get things done! The internship for me consisted of three separate parts: my work with the development department, my work with the membership conference and my separate research on the REAL Act for federally funded comprehensive sex education. Other interns worked in other departments, the staff decided where we were to be placed. The other possibilities included working on the lobby day and in the communications department, or working with the field staff on outreach or program development. (I’m including this information for those of you who are reading this to see if you want to work here- not all will be placed in the development department like I was and so that section of this write-up may not apply to you).

One of the most fun and challenging parts of my internship was the membership conference. The staff had done most of the prep work in the months leading up to it, but my fellow interns and I were able to work on tackling the last minute details. Of the prep work that I did, the most fulfilling was gathering facts about the history of sex education in this country. I found key pieces of legislation and am now able to think of myself as a bit of an expert on how sex ed has been funded historically. This data gathering was for one of the staff members, who used it in her presentation about the context in which we
must look at comprehensive sex ed. It felt really great seeing my work and research in use! Another project that I was able to work on was adding to the timeline, which is a big part of a lot of Choice's workshops and conferences. I was quite proud of the facts I was able to find! Using the research skills that I've honed in college was fun, and let me know that I wouldn't be leaving college with a 'useless' skill!

Other work that I did for the membership conference included a lot of on my feet stuff-doing: making sure attendees' needs were taken care of, picking people up at the airport, putting together a list of stuff to do in DC (which was so fun, because I love my city and wanted the people who came to the conference to love it, too), getting things (like a playlist and sales items) together for the after party, and so on. I knew that every day would be different and that I had to be ready to do what people needed of me, so I made it known to all that I was there to help. I like being a problem solver and doing the on-the-ground work of the membership conference really honed that skill.

The part of the membership conference that I feel was most relevant for my potential career goals was the lobby day. Dressed in our Capital Hill best, we all went to meetings with our members of Congress to talk about the REAL Act for comprehensive sex education funding. I went with a student from New Mexico who otherwise would have been lobbying by herself. It was wonderful to see what advocacy work really looks like and practice it. The meetings were slightly intimidating at first, but the other student and I learned a lot about how to talk to those in power and be efficient.

After the conference ended I began working mostly with my supervisor Robin, the Development Coordinator for Choice USA. He and I got along really well and I was able to understand fairly well what he needed from me most of the time. He gave me free
regain with some projects and specific instructions with others. The work I did for him ranged from difficult and very interesting, such as starting grant proposals and progress reports, to necessary but fairly banal, such as mailing thank you letters to donors and entering new information into the database. I also researched potential sources of funding and put together fundraising parties. The first thing Robin had me do was watch a video about fundraising for small, social justice oriented non-profits. It taught me a lot about development terminology and tactics. Knowing about fundraising is a powerful thing!

What I did to help with the grants was highly informative and I am glad that I did it, because now I have practiced a very important skill.

One difficult part of the internship was when my labor got farmed out to another staff person, generally when Robin was out for the day. I was asked to help one of the other interns with her outreach project and assumed that it would be for the duration of Robin’s absence, but it continued for two weeks. It was not a fun project, and it was a chore getting the willpower to do it. The other interns and I were able to commiserate, which was nice, but it was definitely not a highlight of the summer.

One great thing that I had the ability to do was devise a small project of my own that I could work on whenever I was not directly needed by staff (which was frequently). Another thing I could do during that time was blog, which was a lot of fun. The blogging was highly encouraged! My little project actually came out of a blog post, Sex Ed Stories. I did research and collected personal stories to do a case study about a county in Virginia that teaches comprehensive sex ed. The thought was that the case study could be used to show congress-people or those who do not believe in federal funding for comprehensive sex education that students enrolled in comp sex ed actually do have positive experiences
and that it works. I did research on other counties in Virginia that do things differently. This research involved calling different schools and talking to teachers. I looked at curricula and talked to current high school students over Facebook to do small, mini-interviews about their experiences in sex ed (also known as FLE, Family Life Education). I was very proud of the write up I did for my project. I think I did good work. However, if there was one thing that I would have done differently, it would have been making more time for this project. It needed more time for me to talk to more actual students.

The staff were really supportive of the four interns at Choice and really went out of their way to make sure that we would be prepared to enter into the non-profit field (or any field for that matter) when we graduated. We had small meetings where we could ask the staff questions about their career paths and we met one-on-one with the Executive Director to pick her brain for contacts and information about other organizations. They encouraged us (and paid for us) to go to workshops about finding work and let us go to the Campus Progress National Conference, which had a lot of information about real work that can be done in the DC area. It was nice to know that the staff wanted us to be successful. One thing that I learned from all their help was about informational interviews. I had never heard of them before! I am glad to know about them and will probably start doing them this year (my last year of college).

In the end, while I had a great time this summer working with fun and enthusiastic people, I now know that the non-profit world is not for me… at least not yet. Working in an office 9 to 5 all day everyday was draining, especially compared to all my previous summers working as a camp counselor and chasing children through the woods! I would recommend this job to someone who wants to find out what working in a small non-profit
is like, but if the thought of sitting at a computer screen all day makes you cringe, you might want to reconsider your internship placement choice.

This internship taught me a lot about myself and about the traditional reproductive rights movement, which, after much thought and introspection, I realized I do not want to be a part of anymore. I want to support women without working on access to abortion; I’d prefer to work in support of access to comprehensive sexuality education. However, I am glad to have had this internship experience - I learned a lot and met some great people. It was a good summer!