As a RRASC intern at the The Care Center, I worked primarily as a tutor. The Care Center is an adult education GED center for pregnant and parenting teenagers in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Unlike most GED programs, The Care Center views itself as a college preparatory program. The students at Care Center do the academic work to prepare for the GED, but also take courses in art, yoga, poetry and the humanities. In my capacity as an intern, I spent one day a week in each of the four classrooms and one day aiding with administrative tasks and wherever I was needed.

Three of the four classrooms at The Care Center are tracked by academic level and one is a mixed level Spanish language class. In the three English language classrooms, I was able to tutor in a variety of subjects, but in all four classes I focused most of my energy on tutoring in Math. I really enjoyed being paired one-on-one with individual students to work on Math. Most of the students are working at anywhere from a third to sixth grade math and reading level and have decided that they hate math or that math is the one subject they just can't pass. I think it is so important to have a teacher who really loves math.

People are scared of math and paralyze themselves into a position where they cannot learn it. When you have a teacher who likes math, it plants a seed in your mind that maybe there is something neat about it after all. It was so rewarding to sit with a student and explain division as a concept, instead of as an arbitrary series of rules for what to press on a calculator. “Oh that's what it is!” is a really cool thing for a math tutor to hear. I tried to get the students excited about the relationships between numbers and between different topics in math. I instituted a “number of the day” warm up activity where students needed to create four number sentences using different operations to come to the same number. I used this as an opportunity to introduce inverse functions. Teaching math to
women is an activist activity in itself, socking it to Larry Summer and what not, but teaching math to low-income teenage mothers is downright radical.

It was really interesting to be coming at this internship from the perspective of reproductive justice. A large portion of my students were anti-choice and I found myself getting into a few sticky conversations about my pro-choiceness. I invited the students to join a pro-choice website for young mothers that I run (Girlmom.com) and cringed when one of the students went to reply in a negative way to a good friend's article on being proud for having her abortions. Luckily the post was an essay and not something that could be commented on, so I got a chance to engage the student and ended up having a really productive discussion.

Also, when I brought up some ideas I had for six week courses for the students on healthy relationships and sex positive education, the staff kept trying to steer me towards talking about pregnancy prevention as a goal of the program and I found myself trying to reroute the conversation back to my idea. I disagree that people should be telling anyone, including teenagers, how and when to plan their families. A woman who has one child as a teenager has just as much a right to think about the ideal child spacing that works for her and her children as does a wealthier, older woman. If a woman wants two children close in age and she happens to have the first one at sixteen, she has a right to have the second one at eighteen whether she is “financially stable” and “educated” or not. Even if the early years may be rough, a family is forever and a woman has the right to plan with forever in mind. Plus, recent studies have shown that low-income women who have their children early do not necessarily do less well than their non-birthing peers and, in fact, they may fare better. This makes sense because having a child gives a lot of low-income women access to funding for school, food, and housing that they otherwise would not have access to. I think a huge pitfall in a lot of reproductive rights organizing is that it tends to focus on abortion more than on issues of reproductive equality for marginalized populations. Justice is just as much about letting people have the families they want as it is about access to preventing/terminating pregnancies.

It was rich but challenging to have an internship where I was working directly and primarily with marginalized people. I had a lot in common with my students - I had my son as a teenager and grew
up in a poor family. A major difference between us is that I grew up going to good schools where I was tracked as 'gifted' and expected to do well academically. The City of Holyoke, on the other hand, seriously failed these students. Holyoke has dropout rates well above the state and national averages. These averages only consider high school dropouts; most of my students dropped out in middle school and are not reflected in those numbers. So many of the articles I read about Holyoke seemed to attribute the high drop out rates to the high teen pregnancy rate. But my students’ personal timelines show that they almost all dropped out well before they were pregnant. It was their pregnancies that got them referred to The Care Center and gave them access and support for getting their GEDs and starting to think about college.

Other differences made working at the Care Center challenging. I wasn't working in an explicitly activist space. A lot of the other interns were working in radical spaces where they fit in really well. I felt like a total oddball a lot of the time. For example, one day my students were having a conversation about racial/ethnic stereotypes that they held and I had to navigate how to talk to them about the dangers of racist generalizations without alienating them. They were speaking specifically about Mexican people. I brought up that I was Mexican, that my mother is an immigrant and that when they say, “All Mexican men...” or "All Mexican women...", I hear them talking about my family and myself and I have to disagree. I also have really different ideas about parenting, specifically when it comes to gender and discipline. I brought my son to work with his baby doll and had to field a lot of comments about why my son had a doll. I talked about how I believe men should be raised to see themselves as nurturers and that I felt like it is easier for men to become inactive parents because they are never taught that they are capable of and responsible for nurturing and parenting their children. That response actually went over very well, but there was still some murmuring that I was raising him to be 'gay'. Which brings me to the issue of homophobia. It was not a space where I felt comfortable being out as a queer person. Ideally I would have liked to be out so students would feel more comfortable coming out themselves or talking about issues of sexuality in a non-judgmental space, but I felt like it would compromise the relationships I was building and the work I was able to do. I tried to create a safe space for queer issues without being out myself. For example, in the sex ed
classes I sat in on I spoke really nonchalantly about safe queer sex.

I got close with a lot of the students and thought it was awesome for them to see a teen mother who is in college. I brought them to see my apartment because I live in the family student housing at Smith College. I spoke with them about the privilege college brings. Financial aid is so much nicer than welfare; it’s a lot more money with a lot less surveillance. As a college student you are actually entrusted with money to spend and budget responsibly as you see fit. There are no demeaning interviews where someone pushes you to get a dead end job or grills you on where your money is really coming from. It’s socially acceptable and theoretically sets you up to be able to pay back any parts you need to. Basically, College Rocks! I also took time to talk to students about school, asking them which colleges they were going to apply to after finishing the Care Center, whether or not they had expressed interest in college to me or not.

I struggled with the fact that the Care Center classrooms were tracked, with the most 'qualified' teacher in the highest level classroom. If there is going to be tracking, then the students who need the most should be given the most – but I feel like the students would do better without any tracking at all. The Spanish language classroom was mixed level and seemed to work really well. Also the school has on-going open enrollment so the students are all at different points in their work and very little full class instruction can take place, meaning that students spend most of their class time on GED workbook pages. Also the GED as an academic standard is pretty awful. It is eighth grade level work and definitely not sufficient for college preparation. Fortunately there seem to be more and more “bridge to college” programs for GED recipients. I think it would be amazing if the Care Center could keep students in residence for a full year after passing and focus on true college prep.

For future RRASC interns going to Care Center, I recommend sitting down with your adviser right away and designing a schedule that works for you. Also, know that you will need to be flexible, because things change pretty rapidly. Be committed to finding something to do when nothing is obviously there for you because you will get a lot more out of the internship if your time is full. Try to get involved in multiple non-academic activities because I think this is where a lot of the learning takes place.
Working at the Care Center was really great for solidifying my future plans. I want to go to medical school and work as an Ob/Gyn with midwife style care for pregnant and parenting minors. I want to be a doctor because where I am from midwives cannot accept state health insurance and I am committed to working with marginalized populations. I am definitely interested in Public Health and Sexual/Social health issues as well. Working with my students gave me more perspective on the barriers to health young mothers face, especially young mothers of color and young mothers in poverty. My position at the Care Center also familiarized me with Holyoke and made me more aware of local disparities and has gotten me interested in finding out more about what activism exists in Holyoke that I could contribute to. I am really glad that I chose Care Center and it definitely engaged me. I have a renewed sense of rage and hope and love, and for an activist, that is a very good thing.