I heard about the RRASC summer internships my first year at Hampshire College and immediately decided that I wanted to work towards being qualified enough to apply and maybe even have the opportunity to get placed. Much of what attracted me to the internships was the hands-on nature, the incredibly interesting and diverse organizations, and the close tie to social justice issues. Being an undergrad, I found that it was much more difficult than I thought to find internships that would allow you to truly become part of the organization you are working with- that would view you with enough trust to work on real projects and engage with real issues. I feel fortunate enough to report that I was able to do all these empowering things while working with Generations Ahead this summer. Though I did not truly know what to expect, my RRASC internship was incredibly rewarding and has instilled me with new skills, connections, and the drive to continue with bioethical advocacy work.

Before I even left Massachusetts to start driving to Oakland, CA I had a long chat with the Executive Director of Generations Ahead, Sujatha Jesudason, about the organization and how I would be helping them. I was excited to hear that I would be working with them on a project about human egg donation. I had already had an introduction to egg donation through a bioethics course at Hampshire, so I knew that this was a very complex topic that covered a wide range of discourses and involved many different stakeholders. Generations Ahead is unique in that it works to get people who are commonly left out of bioethical discussions into the conversation.
Since egg donation is foremost a commercial business, much of the academic, economic, and regulative focus is placed on the families who will be receiving the donations and not on the donors who are contributing their biomaterials. Donors are considered replaceable within the economic part of the egg donation system, so Generations Ahead decided to create a project that would give donors a voice and to help them decide if egg donation is suitable for them in the current stage of their lives. To help create a space for voiceless donors, Generations Ahead decided to create a website and a survey.

I was hired to assist with both the website and the survey, as well as bring a different perspective to the project. As a young woman, coming from a college town, I have encountered egg donation in an academic setting as well as a recruiting situation. College campuses and newspapers are prime location for donor advertising since they are often free and target a prominent donor population – college age women. The ads offer rather large sums of compensation (upwards of $8,000) for viable eggs from women under the age of 30. Some ads are generally looking for healthy women, while others specify physical or racial stipulations.

As a member of the target population of the advertisements, I can assuredly say that navigating the egg donation system can be confusing. There is little readily available information that helps potential donors make unbiased decisions around the big choice of whether or not to donate. Part of what I was assigned to do was figure out in what areas would women need assistance about making a donation choice. Furthermore, who would be the best person to help them? A counselor? A trusted health professional? Family members?
Thus, the first large part of my internship was learning about egg donation. Generations Ahead had already started drafting a document that laid out, chronologically, all the steps that a potential donor would go through when she had begun the egg donation process, and that would be used to select which information should go on the egg donation website. It starts with a potential donor’s application and ends with her follow-up visit after the egg retrieval. As the document outlined each of the steps, Generations Ahead also drafted questions or concerns that might arise for the potential donor at each phase. For example, before a donor is accepted into a clinic or placed with an intended parent she is asked to go through a round of medical tests. When she comes to this stage in the process she might want to think about what they are testing for, who will see her test results, and how any results might affect her ability to receive medical insurance.

I joined Generations Ahead just as they were completing the rough draft of this document (which we call the Phase Document), so reading through it allowed me to learn a tremendous amount about egg donation and the donation process. For the first time I truly got a sense of the scope of the information that we are engaging with. When a woman starts the application process it is not as simple as just agreeing to be a donor, there are constantly the three main parties: the donor, the intended parent(s), and the clinic who need to be in consensus with all the arrangements. There are many rounds of physical and psychological examinations, as well as, short and long term legal, compensative, and medical contracts. The phase document revealed that each decision leads to another round of more complex choices until the ultimate retrieval and payment.
My main role with the Phase Document was to edit and condense the information, and then reorganize the material. This is probably one of the places where I learned the most. I have never attempted to reorganize eighty pages of dense material, let alone material that I did not write. Marina Ortega, Generations Ahead’s Managing Director, gave me some fantastic organizational advice that I am sure I can apply to the rest of my academic career: categorization is your best tool! She showed me how to physically distribute the material so I could better see how the information should be organized.

This was extremely exciting because it was the first time that I was allowed to actively interact with the project. I also got to present the new edit of the Phase Document at the first large meeting that we had with our collaborators at the Health Equity Institute. With the final draft of the Phase Document done the next step in my internship was to complete and distribute the egg donation survey.

The 20-minute, anonymous survey was created so that Generations Ahead and the Health Equity Institute could collect information on how women feel about egg donation and what information they would like to have access to when they are deciding whether or not to donate. Editing the survey and uploading it to SurveyMonkey were both pretty quick, and fun tasks, but the true work came in disseminating the survey. During our initial attempt to advertise the survey we had a very difficult time making contact with other organizations, blogs, and websites. I had never tried to make contact with that many different outlets before and the preliminary lack of respondents was very frustrating.

However, during our second round of the dissemination we worked more on a local and person level, asking our friends and close contacts to help us advertise the survey. This effort was much more successful, and within two weeks of opening the
survey we had collected over 150 responses. As I continue to work with Generations Ahead through the fall we will send out another round of emails to women’s health centers and women’s college groups to encourage people to participate in our survey. I am very excited to see how the data develops as we receive more responses.

Finally, the last big project I got to work on was the initial development for the egg donation website. In the last three weeks on my internship I had weekly meetings with our web developer, Adina Chung, to discuss the outline of the website. Adina is incredible and worked with Generations Ahead to design the organizations website. I had never had experience with creating a website so I learned a lot from Adina. I was also really pleased that Sujatha had me conduct the meetings on my own; it was fun and exciting to have the opportunity to work independently. Right when my internship ended we had just bought a couple of domain names and Adina had created the skeleton for the website layout. As I mentioned earlier, I will continue to work with Generations Ahead through the fall semester, so I am continuing to consult with Adina on the website’s development. We hope to present a soft launch of the website to Choice USA in late September.

Other than working on the two main projects: the survey and website, I also had the opportunity to write a couple of blog posts for the Generations Ahead website, to organize and help at a book reading, and assist Sujatha in researching Surrogacy for a paper she is beginning to write. I found that overall in my internship skills that were most useful to me were creativity, flexibility, and independence. These three skills allowed me to complete a significant amount of work and expand my academic repertoire.
My advice for future interns would be to start becoming familiar with your organization and the issues you will be engaging with before you start your internship. That way you will be more prepared to jump directly into your work when you begin. Also, it would be helpful to layout with your supervisor all the work that you hope to complete during your ten weeks, that way you can have concrete goals set and can best organize how your time will be spent. Also, if you have the opportunity to move somewhere new or far away from home, totally take it! Being in a brand new environment was one of the aspects of the internship that was the most exciting for me.

All in all, I had an amazing internship. I am extremely proud that I got to work with Generations Ahead and thrilled that I will be continuing to work with them for the next few months. I learned so much about egg donation, navigating the non-profit scene, and cannot emphasize enough the value of the internship.