Political Research Associates (PRA) is a left-wing think tank that does research on the political Right. The researchers study different elements of the political Right and how it has managed to gain power, without the Left being able to react with the same ease. PRA was founded in 1981, and as with most non-profit organizations has gone through its rough spots and changes over the years, but they have remained an important part of the movements that they are involved in. Getting a chance to work here through the Reproductive Rights Activist Service Corps was a great opportunity.

Over the course of the summer I had two main projects that I worked on. The one that I spent the majority of my time on was the design of a website called Defending Reproductive Justice. This is an update of a book published by Political Research Associates in 2000- entitled Defending Reproductive Rights: An Activist Resource Kit. This project involved many different aspects, including finding updated articles that we could put on the new website. My supervisor Pam Chamberlin and I wrote descriptions for each article so that the viewer knows what the article is about and whether the article will be relevant to their interest. We collected articles both from primary right-wing sources and from secondary left-wing sources about the reproductive justice movement. After some conversations about how we wanted to present the articles it was decided that the secondary source articles would be presented as full text if we could get permission to print them. Before I left we started a campaign to gain permission to publish these articles through emails to the original publishers. I also wrote the acknowledgement page and the page that described how to use the website.
Unfortunately there wasn’t really enough time to complete everything that I had hoped to do with the creation of the website but I also know that I will be able to keep up with what is going on with the site to see what progress is being made. I am the fourth intern to work on this project in the past two years and so I really want to see this project come to some sort of completion.

My other major project was working on entering books into the database in which all the books are cataloged. I was able to input 218 books. The books that I was inputting covered many different subjects ranging from Sociological Theory to post-World War II Nazi emigration. Getting a chance to survey all these different books that were in the collection was a great chance to learn about many different elements involved in studying the right wing.

In addition to these major projects I helped the other interns answer the phones and helped with the filing that needed to be done. Unfortunately I wasn’t able to physically do a lot of the filing, but I helped by sorting things alphabetically, and making sure that we had records of what was in the files in a big notebook that was an outdated print out of the database.

During this internship I did a lot of writing, though one of my frustrations was that most of my writing was so severely edited that sometimes I had a hard time agreeing with and accepting the changes. Through the changes that were made, though, I was able to learn how to write better and with less of a bias in my writing. Through working on the petition for rights to publish articles online I was also able to see how legal contracts are written. Regrettably I never was able to get up the courage to really confront this problem but the writing that I did to definitely did help me learn.
In the smaller projects I also used my phone skills, not only when I was answering the phone, but also in making calls to publishers to figure out who to contact in order to get permission to print the articles. I also increased my data entry skills when putting the books into the database. For the most part the problems that I encountered in the projects that I worked on were minor frustrations that I was able to handle.

While at this internship I was able to develop several important skills, one immediately related to the work I was doing, and related to how I interacted with others at PRA. The one skill that I really was able to improve as a part of the work that I was doing was my writing. I had to write descriptions for each article that presented what the article was about, and what kind of article it was (from the right or the left) while not being biased about the information. I also had to develop my skills in interacting with others both in dealing with the staff and the other interns.

In interacting with the staff, I developed new skills in figuring out where I fit in as an intern, and what that meant my responsibilities were. I tried hard to take the initiative in as many projects as I could; this enabled me to develop my skills of working independently on a project. The level of respect that was given to the interns and the atmosphere that this created was a real joy.

The last skill that I developed over the course of this internship was really more about things that helped the interns get to know each other and the surrounding area. For most of the summer I was the only intern who had really spent any time in Boston, which meant that many times I was the one who helped figure out things to do after work. I didn’t know much of the Boston area myself, but my little knowledge helped us all learn what a great city we were all living in!
Besides learning to live on my own and the enjoyments that I had in the activities in which I participated outside of the internship, the highlight of this experience was the things that I learned from some of the staffers. Studying the Right Wing involves many different elements and the staff at Political Research Associates all have specialties in what they study. Learning from the staff what they know about the different surprising things that they study in right wing spectrum of opinions and associations was a great experience. For instance I was amazed to learn how many different ways the Right presents itself, one example being the many different ways the Pro-Life movement attacks abortion, as well as the elements of the Right who support abortion for various reasons.

At first I was really worried about meeting the other interns and hearing what their academic experiences were (most of them deeply interested in politics in a way that I have not been) and I was afraid that I wasn’t going to fit in. It turned out that my sociology background not only helped me in the studies that I was undertaking, but also was encouraged by many of the staffers, particularly one, Chip Berlet, who had been a sociology major in college before he dropped out, and wanted to help me increase my knowledge.

Before this internship, I thought that I had an idea of what I wanted to do career-wise. Now I’m really not so sure. I am still interested in many of the same things, working with GLBT rights, and disability rights, and how those things are related to other movements, such as the Reproductive Justice movement, but this internship helped me realize that those things can lead in many different directions. So instead of really helping
me shrink down the ideas of what I want to do it turned out that this internship opened up the possibilities in ways I really hadn’t expected.

As far as what I would have done differently during this internship experience, mostly it would be that during the beginning of the summer I would have pressed the staff harder for more work. It seemed to take the staff a long time to give the interns the majority of the work responsibilities for the summer, leaving us with not much to do at the beginning. This was frustrating, but something that could have been prevented if I had asked for more work from the beginning. In addition to giving me more to do in the beginning of the summer, this probably would have allowed me to finish more of the projects I worked on.

Having said that, I really didn’t come into this internship with any expectations of what it was going to be like, or how it was going to help me. It turns out that it far exceeded anything that I could have imagined. Being able to live on my own for the first time helped me grow and mature in ways I wasn’t really sure were possible. Opening my eyes to all the possibilities that are out there for my major was a great opportunity for me. I have always been someone who enjoys the regularity of working forty hours a week, but to have the chance to work at a job where I felt I was contributing to a major part of what the office did was a great feeling. I was initially very nervous to move to Boston and take on this internship, and now I am so glad I did, I can’t imagine that I could have had a better summer.

The projects that PRA has going right now all surround various elements of social justice that are relevant to today’s society. Everyone at PRA admits that you have to be a little bit crazy to do the kind of work that they do, to study the Right Wing elements that
they study, but it was also incredibly interesting. I learned more about social justice in the 10 weeks that I was at PRA than I ever have it seems. It definitely opened my eyes to the idea that I want to continue doing social justice work.

The one piece of advice that I have for potential future interns at PRA is that to understand that you are really going to have to be able to keep on the staffers to give you work. But know that you will learn a lot, and even possibly question what you believe, which can be a great experience. The people are a joy to work for and it really is a great experience for anyone who wants to learn how this country works.

The overall value of this internship was impossible to see in the beginning of the summer, but now that I have worked through it, I will definitely be doing more internships in the future. I am looking forward to take what I have learned from this internship and bring it to the classes that I will be taking in the future and to my future plans in what I want to do.