This summer, I interned at the RU12? Community Center in Burlington, Vermont, which was in the process of changing its name to Pride Center of VT. The Center serves the queer population not only in Burlington, but also in underserved rural areas across the state. The name change will help to represent their intention to build a network of services across the state and provide community for folks isolated by the rural environment. The main projects I worked on were coordinating Summer Semester classes, writing and designing educational pamphlets, assisting the family program in the development of a Town Hall series for queer families, and researching LGBTQ issues (tobacco use, obesity, drug use, diabetes, military regulations on trans* individuals) for the Executive Director’s advocacy and outreach work.

The Summer Semester classes were my main responsibility. I begin with talking to staff members and conducting a survey to determine what classes the community would like to see and what resources we had available as far as available teachers. While I was totally supported throughout this process and felt free to ask any questions I had, I worked very independently on scheduling the courses and communicating with the teachers. It turned out to be very difficult to predict which classes would be well attended. There were many reasons for the ups and downs of attendance, but to see the classes go so well overall was very rewarding. I think that there is an existing foundation now to create another Summer Semester series in 2015 that can use some of what we learned this year to make it more successful.

The Family Town Halls had been in the works for a while and I was asked by the staff member in charge of the family program to help with some of the organizational tasks of getting it off the ground. The first one was a few days ago and I’m so happy to see that the series is on its way. I really feel that it is so
important to join existing sources of information to make it easy for queer families to navigate the process of having children and raising those children. For me, it was a place to see the link between reproductive rights and social justice in an organization that does not deal primarily with reproductive rights in the traditional sense. I am hopeful that this series will be a space for families to network with each other and share joys and concerns.

In order to complete these projects, I drew on my ability to multitask and work independently. I really like working on a few projects at once and shifting between them to break up the day and that suited the way that this organization works. Because the staff is so small, everyone works in a few different areas and is always working on five projects when they only have time for three. So in a way, I could multitask while making the load lighter for staff members. I was also able to contribute in a variety of areas from graphic design to publicity to program planning and research. This is a unique internship in that I came in to with the expectation of working in the health and wellness office, learning about HIV prevention and planning some summer classes and I’m leaving having done that and also having learned about a variety of LGBTQ issues, interacting with the community in a variety of settings and with a collection of materials I produced or helped in producing. It was a very rich summer in that way.

Throughout all of my projects, both major and minor and responsibilities, I had total support from my supervisor and the other staff members. I felt comfortable to ask for more work or for direction on my projects. It was inspiring to see how the staff functions to cover all of the areas of the Center’s work. Somehow, five people and a changing group of interns accomplish the work of an entire non-profit that shelters a few independent projects. After a week or two, I knew where to direct my questions and the questions of callers from the community. The staff and my supervisor in particular made it easy to adjust anything in order to make my workdays more in tune with the way I work best. So it was always easy to come to work.

Because of this, I didn’t encounter many difficulties over the course of the summer. But I will say that the time period (10 weeks) brings some challenges. Ten weeks is a long period of time when you see it as 400 hours or two and a half months but once I started working, it flew by. I began to see how long the envisioning, planning and publicity stages take and even though I started planning Summer Semester classes my first week, there were still some classes scheduled after the end of my internship. The Family Town Halls will all take place at the end of August and through September and this planning started my second week at the Center. It is impossible and would be somewhat irresponsible to jump into an event, throwing things together just to make it happen in a week or two rather than taking planning time and getting input from a variety of people.

In my eighth week or so, the Health and Wellness office put together a forum on PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis for HIV prevention) with the Department of Health. It was well attended and the group generated some great suggestions of putting together a list of informed, non-judgmental doctors who
will prescribe PrEP. I would have loved to be involved in this project if I was at the Center for a longer period of time, but it really would be a very long-range project for the Health and Wellness project. But at that point I had two weeks left and was tying up the loose ends of my existing projects.

At the beginning of my internship, it was hard to imagine that I had the skills to plan programs or even to write blog posts without someone checking it before I published. I did feel confident preparing research though and I attribute this to my education. It comes very naturally to have a research question, know where to find answers and present it in a logical way for a specific purpose. It turned out to be a very useful skill to have at the organization. Surprisingly, my education has had some gaps in terms of queer issues. Obviously I was familiar with the effects that marginalization in general has on health, social inclusion and quality of life. But, there were many little moments this summer during conversations of trans* issues or microaggressions at clubs that opened my eyes to a broad portrait of the queer community.

It was also fascinating to work with the queer community in a rural state such as Vermont. So much of the needs that the Center meets are around social events and simply providing a space to talk with and create community with other rural queers. My education definitely has been lacking a rural perspective and I’m leaving this internship inspired to ask more questions about rural life in the work that I do. It is very easy to think about the United States as a collection of urban centers and metropolitan areas but so much of the country falls outside of that and it creates unique consequences for life and health.

Overall, I am very proud of my internship. I feel that I did good work and hope that it will be useful to the Center in the future. I respect this organization very much. It takes a lot of dedication to the work and lot of trust to know that making services available is meaningful and worthwhile even if it is hard to predict which services and events will be take advantage of. The network of staff, volunteers and supporters is inspiring. The atmosphere of a community center (people dropping in, support groups running throughout the day, phones ringing all day) turned out to be a great atmosphere to work in. On days I spent designing publicity materials or compiling research briefs, it was not distracting, but motivating to write emails to a woman asking about family planning options for her lesbian daughter, to talk on the phone to a trans* veteran who was seeking support in rural Vermont, and to hear community members using our space and talking to each other. It connected me to the work I was doing and to the reason I was drawn to the Pride Center of Vermont in the first place.

For future interns, I would say congratulations and please use me as a resource as you prepare for your exciting summer! I would also advise thinking seriously about what you’d like to take away from the summer and what special skills you have to offer to this specific organization and discuss them with your supervisor early on. The Center has many opportunities and if you are self-motivated and have lots of ideas, you will do very well here. Even if you feel under-qualified at first, you will realize that with great support and your existing
skills, you can have a successful internship in terms of your personal development and be an asset to a wonderful organization. You will have access to people with an incredible amount of life experience and connections. The work that you will do is never busy work; it is always substantive work that has a specific audience. For instance, the research I compiled on LGBTQ opiate use was presented by the Executive Director at a governor’s forum on opiate use in Vermont in order to advocate for inclusion of rural queers in policies and outreach. Because the organization is so small, you will have the opportunity to have your voice heard and make your work really count.

I’m deeply grateful for this opportunity. There is no way I would have been able to work at the Pride Center for a summer as an unpaid intern, so I am grateful to CLPP/RRASC for the support and training. And I am beyond grateful for the Pride Center for an amazing summer working with activists in Vermont’s rural queer community. I am leaving with a portfolio of work, an array of work experience and many connections that I will never forget.

More information on the RRASC internship program: clpp.hampshire.edu/RRASC