This summer, I was fortunate enough to spend 11 weeks as a reproductive justice intern at the National Asian Pacific American Women’s Forum (NAPAWF) in Washington, D.C. I had very high expectations prior to arriving in Washington, D.C., and my experience both of the city and of NAPAWF exceeded them spectacularly.

I had my first day at NAPAWF on June 4, 2013, and was quickly put to work as a new member to NAPAWF’s Reproductive Justice department. The first long term project I was given was drafting the national policy newsletter update sent out by NAPAWF, called AP(eye) on the Hill. The purpose of the newsletter was to keep nationwide members and other constituents of NAPAWF up to date on current issues happening throughout the U.S. that impacted Asian and Pacific Islander (API) women and girls, the Asian and Pacific American community, as well as advocacy work the national office in D.C. was working on.

I worked on three months worth of newsletters—a project that was incredibly challenging and even more productive. Not only was it very intimidating to be writing something that was being distributed on a national level, but it was also incredibly challenging to take incredibly complex news issues and sum them up into succinct yet comprehensive and understandable paragraphs. While it was initially a bit difficult for me to write AP(eye), learning to do so has been endlessly beneficial. I learned to write short meaningful pieces, which are much harder to write than longer articles. I also learned to pull the most important or relevant
pieces of information from readings, which I believe is a very useful skill, and something that can be applied in my coursework. Because AP(eye) looked at national reproductive justice issues, it was necessary for me to stay engaged with issues and movements happening across the country. This was especially nice because I have been used to being in the “college bubble” for the past few years. Staying engaged in issues that were happening around the country allowed me to see the ways in which the work I did at NAPAWF and Hampshire translates into the real world.

In addition to writing, I also assisted one of my supervisors, Christine Poquiz, in Bridge Building Meetings. The Bridge Building Meetings were a collaborative effort with the Coalition for Abortion Access and Reproductive Equality (CAARE—also behind the All Above All campaign) to strengthen relationships between Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) organizations and reproductive justice organizations. This project was still in its initial steps during my time at NAPAWF, which allowed me to attend the first meetings and interviews and experience the initiation of a connection between two organizations.

The interviews happened several times a week, and over the course of my internship we met with dozens of AAPI and reproductive justice organizations. We would ask a representative of the organization, often the programs director and even sometimes the executive director, detailed questions about their organizations. We often interviewed organizations on a wide variety of issues—from logistics about members or constituents, organizational goals and priorities, internal processes, and even funding. This offered me the opportunity to not only begin
learning about how much goes into running an organization, but also the huge variety of organizations and ways in which they can be run. I got to witness firsthand the importance of networking and building connections in one's professional life. I was also able to meet leaders of amazing organizations in Washington, D.C., such as Guttmacher, the Center for Reproductive Rights, NARAL, and the National Women’s Health Network.

The Bridge Building Meetings also allowed me to begin considering the ways in which allyship and intersectional work can be incredibly beneficial to organizations and to strengthening the reproductive justice movement as a whole. One issue that often came up in meetings with reproductive justice organizations, specifically more mainstream organizations, was the failure to include Asian and Pacific Islanders in their work, outreach, and research. Omission of data on Asian and Pacific Islander women, or the failure to disaggregate what little data exists on API communities, is a reoccurring issue that NAPAWF frequently fights in its advocacy, and something I found myself continually addressing throughout the summer. This simultaneous generalization and disregard of API identities and cultures has detrimental impacts that often manifests in health disparities and socioeconomic inequalities in the API community.

My biggest long term internship project was the Reproductive Justice toolkit, which I worked on in collaboration with the other reproductive justice intern, Anreeka Patel. The intention of this project was to create a resource that could be distributed to NAPAWF chapters across the country. The toolkit included comprehensive written pieces and fact sheets on reproductive justice issues and
was unique in its attention to how these issues specifically affected API women and girls.

The toolkit included several sections: Reproductive Justice 101, Health Disparities and API Women, Abortion and API Women, Contraception and API Women, Immigrant Women and Reproductive Justice, and an addendum. Anreeka and I wrote introductory pieces to each section, created fact sheets, issue briefs, resource lists, and brainstormed and drafted workshops and discussion ideas for each section, including discussion tips, event and activity ideas, and talking points. Each section was incredibly extensive and Anreeka and myself authored much of the written pieces in the toolkit. Creating a toolkit of such a substantial size was a wonderful challenge. Because we intended the toolkit to be a resource for chapters and members of NAPAWF who may not have a background in reproductive justice, we tried to write the toolkit in a way that was accessible to all levels of activism. We also made an effort to keep the language of the toolkit inclusive of all bodies and identities within the reproductive justice movement.

One challenge that came up throughout the composition of the toolkit was bringing up issues of sex, sexuality, and reproductive health within Asian and Pacific Islander communities. Many API communities, while potentially more liberal in general, are more conservative when discussing these issues within families or communities. This, I learned, was a problem not just in creating a reproductive justice toolkit, but also in reproductive health work throughout the API community. The taboo status of sexuality and sexual health in API communities means that everything from sex to gynecological exams is oftentimes not discussed within
families. The result of this silence has had powerful negative impacts on young API women and girls, often culminating in poor knowledge of sexual health and contraceptive measures, fewer reproductive health services accessed, and higher incidences of preventable diseases such as HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and HPV. It was very interesting to consider the different cultural and structural forces that intersected to create and contribute to this stigma. It was difficult to come up with a strategy to combat the taboo status of sexuality and sexual health within the API community. The most successful strategy was encouraging API women and girls to share their stories. I learned very quickly working at NAPAWF that the best way to make productive and transformative change in the reproductive justice movement, especially within communities of color, is to think intersectionally about every issue. Failure to do so means failure to recognize and address all contributing factors of the problem, and any solution created without that analysis would only be a minor and temporary fix at best.

While most of my work at NAPAWF dealt with reproductive justice, I also did a lot of work on immigration and immigration reform. While this often looked like writing issue briefs, attending rallies, and even incorporating immigration reform pieces into the Reproductive Justice toolkit, my favorite experience was planning a conference hosted by one of NAPAWF’s coalitions, We Belong Together. In June, We Belong Together invited over 150 women leaders from across the country to come to Washington, D.C. to participate in a conference on comprehensive immigration reform that treated women and families equally and humanely. The conference ended with a visit to the Hill to lobby Congressional Representatives and Senators.
This was a great experience in conference planning and logistics and worked to strengthen my organizational abilities, as well as my ability to plan ahead and pay attention to small details. The skills I learned in planning the first We Belong Together conference came into use twice more this summer in assisting planning another immigration reform event and later a civil disobedience event that took place in front of the House Offices on the Hill.

Working and living in Washington, D.C. proved to be an incredible experience in and of itself. It was an amazing time to be in Washington, D.C. during a summer of long awaited and potentially great immigration reform, landmark decisions being issued from the Supreme Court, and huge steps both forward and backward for the reproductive justice movement happening across the country. I was able to attend several Congressional briefings and lobbied Senators and Congressional Representatives for progressive and comprehensive immigration reform. I was allowed to go to the White House to see President Obama’s remarks on the Affordable Care Act on behalf of NAPAWF, and later attended an “Intern Only” briefing hosted by the White House. One month I was celebrating the Supreme Court’s DOMA decision, and the next, I was helping plan and document a civil disobedience event on the Capitol in protest of Congress’s refusal to take up immigration. These were incredible experiences that could only have happened in Washington, D.C. and the overall experience was deeply influential to determining my track after college. My supervisors served as mentors throughout my experience, guiding my continued exploration of the reproductive justice movement, giving me endless advice on law schools and advocacy work, and even directing me to the best
restaurants and D.C. experiences. I ended my time in D.C. with a strong Division III proposal, a clear plan for what I wanted to do after graduation, and connections to organizations I would love to work for or with someday.

Interning at NAPAWF was an extremely empowering experience. I have never worked in a space that is completely people of color, and never in an organization that is solely focused on API women and girls. I was exposed to disparities and issues the API community suffers from that I had never known of or even considered. I had studied women’s health throughout my past three years at Hampshire, but had never truly considered issues of cultural or linguistic competency in health care until my work at NAPAWF. Working at NAPAWF was an incredible crash course in thinking through reproductive justice issues with a lens of intersectionality. It was also awe-inspiring to work with so many brilliant women of color. I entered NAPAWF timidly trying to love and accept my identity as a young Asian American woman, and left feeling empowered and fiercely determined by it. I’m so grateful for my time at NAPAWF, my experiences in D.C., and this opportunity granted to me by the RRASC program.