Projects and Tasks

My work for the summer was mostly committed to organizing a spreadsheet for the 1 in 3 abortion storytelling campaign. The 1 in 3 Campaign is a collection of abortion stories from folks all across the country, sharing their experiences with abortion access as a means of normalizing abortion as a medical procedure that 1 in 3 cis-women in their lifetime will have. The goal of my project for the summer was to take the 1,000 stories of the 1 in 3 Campaign and compile them into a spreadsheet that was divided by both state and topic. By doing so, the staff of Advocates can pull stories that are specific to the state or topic for which anti-abortion legislation may be being proposed or recently passed into law. One of the main uses that my completion of the spreadsheet will support is the social media usage of the stories in tweets to specific state legislators. The tweeting of stories to specific legislators from specific states will be a way for Advocates to reach out to legislators for three primary goals. The intention with legislators who have a history of supporting abortion access laws would be to applaud and encourage them to continue being a champion for reproductive justice. The goal with “soft and situational” supporters, representatives who are occasionally in support of access laws and then sometimes not, would be to encourage them to stand more consistently in support of abortion access. Lastly, with staunch non supporters, the goal would be to highlight the abortion stories of their constituents in an effort to share with them a real human perspective from the bodies they so often pass controlling legislation around.

The other large task of my summer was developing and then co-facilitating an allyship training for staff within the Advocates for Youth office. In preparation for Urban Retreat,
Advocate’s annual gathering of all the young people in its Youth Activist Network, they wanted to do a staff training that would educate staff on best practices for supporting the young people they would be engaging with during the retreat weekend. My main role in coordinating the training was creating my own case study of a possible scenario of a young person’s experience at Urban Retreat, and how staff would be involved in supporting them through any potential discomfort or conflict with of youth attendees. During the training, I facilitated an analysis of the case study and a discussion addressing what some appropriate responses to such situations might be.

Skills

The main skills that I used throughout the summer were largely technology-based. Given that all 1,000+ of the submissions for the 1in 3 Campaigns stories are all online, the beginning portion of the summer was mostly me learning how to navigate the online database of the stories to learn how to properly search and then catalog the stories. This summer most definitely enhanced my experience with Microsoft Excel programming, as my entire project was summarized into three spreadsheets. The spreadsheet work was intensive as I had to first divide all the stories into multiple tabs by their state, and then read every single story to catalog them by topic.

The second skillset that I really think I enhanced this summer in the process of creating the workshop was curriculum development. Along with my co-facilitator, another staff member in the office, we collaborated across a series of one-on-one meetings to determine what the best approach would be for the training so that it could be most effective for our intended goal. As someone who had not had much experience in planning a workshop or leading a training space
before, being so intentional about crafting a space in which knowledge could be shared best was so beneficial for me. I learned that there is so much more to a training than just the training itself. It’s necessary to create ground rules so that the training itself feels like enough space for folks to push their comfort zone and grow. I learned that including an interactive component allows participants to try out the skills they are learning instead of just talking to them about it, allowing a safe space to talk out mistakes or uncertainties. Lastly, I practiced being mindful of language that is being used so that a training can be accessible to the level of knowledge and experience (or lack thereof) that a group of participants may have.

Challenges

The most challenging aspect of my summer was creating the curriculum for the training. I think this was the most challenging thing for me not only because I had never done it before, but the immense work performance anxiety I experienced while creating the case study and curriculum. As someone who struggles with anxiety and perfectionism, the task of creating the curriculum was so new to me, that I really struggled with whether or not I was doing it correctly. I think that this portion of the summer taught me a very important lesson of being gentle and honest with myself about what I don't know and when to ask for help. The process of creating the training curriculum and case study taught me not to be so hard on myself about learning a new task, and not to approach the uncertainty with such anxiety. It taught me the process of reaching out and checking in with my supervisor when I had questions and needed feedback as opposed letting my anxiety overtake me. Also, it taught me have confidence in my work and present it without so much pre-judgement of the caliber or my work. Overall, I think the process of creating the case study and curriculum showed me my anxiety manifesting in a way that was
clearly unhealthy, and indicative of how much I need to work on addressing it and streamlining self-care around it into my career. I struggled with what it means to want to work in an office environment with managers, supervisors, deadlines, and expectations without feeling overwhelmed by my mental illness struggles. Feeling so anxious, even in a space that’s supportive as Advocates made me nervous and question what I would ever do and how I would function at work if the space was less conscious of regarding self-care and mental wellness. I think if anything, this mental challenge of the summer just definitely confirmed to me how absolutely necessary a supportive job space will be for me, because I know how constantly mindful of my mental wellness and anxiety that I have to be in order to be well and productive.

**Highlights**

My first highlight was the opportunity I got to serve as a panelist in a conversation on the sexual education needs of LGBTQ at the 2016 HHS Teen Pregnancy and Prevention Grantee Conference in Baltimore, Maryland. The experience was such an affirmation to why I do this work! The conference that we were speaking to was a gathering of hundreds of government officials and their grantee organizations who work in classrooms, non-profits, and state-funded programs to serve the reproductive rights of young people. The purpose of our panel was to inform this group of the unique experiences that LGBTQ youth of color face at the intersections of their identities, sharing what we feel is currently lacking in reproductive services to young people, and what we think needs to be done to improve access and impact.

The audience was very receptive to the information we shared based on our personal experiences, and I was so overwhelmed at how impactful folks felt like our commentary was to them going back and making their organizations better for the young people they serve. It’s so
strange to me how “common sense” some of the information we shared may seem, but moments like this remind me of bubbles of community I have positioned myself within, and how misunderstood or unfamiliar these lived experiences are to the folks that exist outside of that. At any rate, I was happy to be able to play a part in sharing this information with them because hopefully, just maybe, one of those attendees will actually be intentional in taking that knowledge back to their organization and initiate some type of change that will make their work more beneficial and accessible to young people that look like me and share similar experiences.

I think the second highlight of my summer were the weekend adventures that I had at various events and gatherings in the DC area. I think I am very proud of how much I stepped out of my comfort zone to embrace the array of community spaces that DC had to offer me. As the summer wore on and especially in the aftermths of such intense racial and sexuality based violence across the country, the spaces of queer femmes and spirituality practitioners that I tapped into were so essential to my balance and wellness. I am forever grateful and endeared to the folks I met along the way and the relationships I established with people and organizations in the city that I know I can always return too (never a goodbye, always a “see you later” type of bonds). Not only do I think that it benefited me personally in terms of wellness, but it also allowed me to tap into some of the more informally constructed spaces of social justice work being done that I think proved to me that I am interested in doing that type of fluid community oriented work than necessarily a 9-5 office job.

_Academic Influence and Life Path_

I think that my position as a Comparative Women’s Studies major and Sociology/Anthropology minor at Spelman most definitely equipped me for the discourses that
Advocates for Youth is engaging and the type of work that their interested in doing. More specifically, I think that the education I have received regarding the historic ways that the government has sought to control the reproductive capabilities of communities, particularly of poor women and women of color, gave me an advantage coming into the office because I have a working understanding of reproductive justice. I think that it supported the development of my understanding of the policy work around reproductive access going on at Advocates because I could recognize that this fight is nothing new, but rather a product of the deeply racialized and gendered understandings of brown bodies and women’s bodies in this this country. My work at Spelman to develop a critical intersectional black feminist perspective of these subjects most definitely gave me a heads up on understanding the root causes of systemic oppressions (the “-isms”) that these restrictive policies and legislation stem from.

In regards to addressing the intersectional nature of reproductive justice that Advocates addresses with other social issues, I definitely think my academic background helped support my understanding of reproductive justice as an intersectional social justice issue. I think I was already well informed that the reproductive oppression we face is rooted in systemic structures that permeate all the areas of our life, so I think Advocates just educated me to the examples of the multitude of ways these issues intersect. Homophobia is going to impact the sexual education of youth if LGBTQ identities are considered as too “unnatural” or inappropriate to teach to young people. State violence is a reproductive issue if black women can’t have babies without being afraid they will be killed. We can’t fully address sexual assault and sexual violence if we don’t acknowledge the lack of conversation in sexual education about consent and desire. I think Advocates does such a great job of addressing these intersections (and teaching
their young activists like me about them), because staff members themselves see these issues from an intersectional lens.

In regards to how the internship influenced my life path, I think it ironically taught me that while the policy focused sector of Advocates is super awesome, policy work is not really what I am passionate about. Instead, my summer experiences such as participating on the panel of co-facilitating the staff training showed me that I am definitely more of a people person, and definitely more interested in directly teaching and mobilizing communities. I think in my experience of both the panel and the staff training, what I am most excited about is seeing the “lightbulb moment”, that moment when the knowledge that I have been able to share through my transparency of my own experiences is realized. I think it’s those moments that I do this work for most, because for me a large part of my social justice work is committed to genuinely moving minds. I find myself most motivated by community engagement, either by informing folks outside of marginalized communities about how they can act in solidarity with those communities, or by supporting and uplifting the voices of the marginalized in being on the forefront of their own liberation. To be honest, I am so frustrated with the white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchial structure of our society and government that being in government spaces lobbying or otherwise engaging those institutions so directly feels really yucky to me. As far as my career path, I realized this summer that I am much more interested in work directly with people to help them get free!

Internship Final Thoughts and Advice to Future RRASCS (this is my favorite part!)

My experience as a RRASC intern in Washington, DC with Advocates for Youth was everything that I could ask for, and literally the best summer ever! Advocates is such a loving
and supportive space to a young person like myself, because they truly center the young people they work with. I am a firm believer that oppressed communities should be the ones spearheading their own liberation, and Advocates exemplifies that. They are so much about actually transferring the skills, knowledge, and connections they have to their young people so that then the auspice of leading the movement is in those young people’s hands. I love that they are an organization eager to watch their young people be great! It is super important to me that they focus on sharing the skills for liberation, rather than attempting to force their own ideal of what that liberation should look like.

My last words and final thoughts to future RRASCs is to BE BOLD! The opportunity to be a RRASC intern is literally the once the once in a lifetime opportunity to drop into a city for 3 months, do dope work with a dope organization, and have someone finally support you doing so (which is not easy in a capitalist society that does not support the movement of communities getting free)! I encourage you all to be bold in all aspects of your internship, both in and out of your workspace. Don’t be afraid to chime in on something in that office meeting, you’re not “just the intern”, your input is relevant and valid. Don’t be afraid to search up events in the city and go, even if you don’t know anyone. You may just find friends and a community that will support you with so much love, and be friends to you long after the summer is done. And document everything! Take your final reports, any personal journal entries, and any creative art you produce over the summer as memories of this wonderful experience that you’ll never want to forget. The great black feminist foremother Audre Lorde said, “be deliberate and afraid of nothing”. Live that fully and watch the magic that unfold for you.