This summer I interned at the RU12? Community Center in Burlington, Vermont. RU12? works to educate, celebrate, and advocate for LGBTQ Vermonters of all ages. My time at RU12? was spent working on an HIV testing and prevention program, 6 Degrees, and developing queer women’s social and educational programming. My work on 6 Degrees consisted of developing a tracking system for potential participants. 6 Degrees is a program funded through the public health department of Vermont, targeted at folks at high risk of contracting HIV and encouraging them to get tested by utilizing a social networking model. This model consists of participants as either community advocates or network associates. Community advocates (CA) are folks who have connections to people engaged in high-risk activity such as intravenous drug use or unprotected sex with multiple partners. CAs are incentivized to recruit network associates (NA) to come in for a free and anonymous HIV test. NAs receive an incentive if they test. The program was implemented in response to a decline in anonymous, walk-in HIV testing in Vermont.

I assisted in developing a spreadsheet which monitored various demographics of both the CAs and NAs, in accordance with the grant requirements. This meant I spent time scoring the grant requirements to ensure that we collected the data required by the department of public health. I also drafted a letter to
various local organizations, which had connections to folks engaging in high-risk activity, asking for their assistance in referring participants. As a part of the Health and Wellness office, we spent time brainstorming approaches to enlisting CAs, including strategies for how to talk about getting tested and navigating the complex social territory that high-risk activities present.

In addition to my work on 6 Degrees, I also was working on generally developing the center’s women’s programming. I hosted a monthly women’s film and pool night. I organized a series of community-led summer classes/workshops, which varied from a hiking skills workshop to a self-exam workshop. I spent a significant time organizing the self-exam workshop. This type of educational program, based in self-care and health, was new for the center. I collaborated with a local naturopath to create a workshop that was trans* inclusive in both language and material presented. The workshop gave folks the skills to complete their own basic cervical, breast, and chest exam.

The skills I used most during my internship were my comfort with independent work, people skills, professional writing, and understanding of public health issues and the ability to talk about them. The highlights of my internship experience were the exceptional staff and of the challenge of implementing a real public health program. The staff at RU12? are a passionate, experienced, and supportive group of people. I felt like a part of a family during my time at RU12? and never once felt lost or un-supported in my work. The staff were seasoned teachers that made the transition into the RU12? community effortless. The experience of implementing a public health program, 6 Degrees, was invaluable. I am truly
grateful for the opportunity to see the inner workings of a public health initiative specifically focused on HIV. For example, witnessing the logic of public health assessments of risk categories and the logistics of grant requirements was extremely valuable.

My number one fear going into this internship was that I would not be prepared to dive into the work at the center. However, this feeling quickly dissipated as I realized that I was one of the more competent and capable interns at RU12? I would absolutely attribute this, in part, to my academic studies at Hampshire. My studies at Hampshire have consisted of women’s public health issues, specifically the politics of reproductive and sexual health. Through my work with Jill Lewis, I have focused on HIV and women’s health, as well as understanding the gap between the reproductive rights movement and HIV/AIDS. Thus working on 6 Degrees at RU12? was very fitting. I came into the project with a strong foundational knowledge of the virus and its social construction and stigmas. This was wildly important while working on the program; I had the appropriate language to talk about HIV, its transmission, and the politics of testing. My understanding of the complexity of high-risk activities and how they contribute to the actualization of testing proved useful as well. For example, we often spoke of how for IV drug users, having just used could ensure clearer consent than during withdrawal. Generally my familiarity with HIV contributed greatly to my work on the program; I came into my internship comfortable talking about a complicated and often difficult topic.

One morning at the center I received a call from a woman interested in becoming a community advocate for 6 Degrees. She was a white, heterosexual, cis-
gender women who wanted to reach women like her, who engaged in unprotected
sex with multiple partners, for the program. We were able to have a discussion
about the stigma and complexities around heterosexual women and HIV. She also
asked me general sexual health questions about various STDs. I felt more than
confident in offering my advice and knowledge of these issues due to my time spent
studying both the biological formalities of sexual health, as well as its social politics.
This is just one example of how my studies at Hampshire informed and assisted the
work I did at RU12?.

My time at RU12? greatly influenced how I have begun to think about my
career goals and life path. Many of my co-workers at RU12? represented career
paths I had previously thought about, including certified social workers and staff
who have spent their whole career in non-profit work. The executive director of
RU12?, Kim Fountain, offered me invaluable career advice, suggesting multiple
graduate programs she thought I would excel in. I can confidently say that my time
at RU12? solidified my interest in pursuing health advocacy and direct service work
in the non-profit sector, potentially around queer and or women’s health issues or
HIV/AIDS.

For future RRASC interns at RU12? I would first say congratulations! You will
be working in an affirming and conscious environment with an exceptional staff.
Secondly, I would suggest that interns are comfortable working independently on
projects. The staff at RU12? will thoroughly train you to successfully complete your
work; however they are a very busy group of people and my ability to creatively
strategize projects and execute them on their own was very much appreciated. This
is not meant to imply that they are too busy to support or guide interns, it was quite the opposite, yet my independence with work fit well into the dynamic of the staff. Overall I find RU12? to be an exceptional organization doing significant work for the queer community in Vermont, guided by one of the most beautiful and competent networks of activists I have ever met.