My RRASC intern site was the Trans Buddy Program (TBP), which falls under the Program for LGBTI Health at Vanderbilt University Medical Center (VUMC) in Nashville, Tennessee. My main duties for the summer revolved around two major projects, the first of which was supporting the Trans Buddy Program by coordinating trainings, formalizing procedures for the launch of an affiliate program, and streamlining the Trans Buddy Program workflow to capture patient experiences and handle patient calls more efficiently. The Trans Buddy Program doesn’t have any full time staff dedicated to it, so I spent most of my summer supporting the program by providing manpower to projects that didn’t previously have enough support to be executed. By the end of the summer, I had coordinated two volunteer trainings, created a new system to route calls to volunteers and record patient interactions, and made steps towards formalizing many of the programs protocols.

My other major project was health care research, which involved me working on a manuscript that proposed a systems level model to improve transgender quality of health care. What we were specifically trying to do was create health care quality improvement model that could be implemented at a broad, health systems level (think hospital or policy level), like creating provider trainings based on transgender community feedback or researching transgender health care trends at the national level. This policy level approach to research was something entirely new to me, so I learned a great deal about the research process and health care policy. By the conclusion of the internship, I had submitted an abstract to present at the National Transgender Health Summit, and created a draft for a manuscript I plan to submit for publication in the near future.
By working on both programmatic and research projects, I got to hone a variety of skills I will use in my future career. Supporting the Trans Buddy Program gave me experience with community organizing and let me work with a variety of people within the medical community. Conducting research sharpened a different set of skills and gave me experience with conducting literature review, constructing a tangible manuscript from an idea, and working through the research editing and publication process. Because my research project was something completely new to me, there was an incredibly steep learning curve. Towards the beginning of the internship, I definitely wondered if I even had the skills to do the work, but with the support of my supervisors, I was able to emerge with a much better understanding of our research project. That project in particular helped strengthen my perseverance when it comes to overwhelming assignments, and gave me the tools to tackle them more efficiently in the future. I’m grateful that I had the chance to work on such a diverse set of projects because it strengthened my ability to manage my time and work in both group and individual settings.

Because of the scope of the Program for LGBTI Health, I had the opportunity to get involved in a lot of side projects outside of my two main ones. With other program interns, I got to go out into the community, educate folks on LGBTI health issues, and table at Nashville Pride, which was an incredibly fun experience. I also had the opportunity to shadow physicians, including an anesthesiologist, gastroenterologist, and med/peds physician. It was awesome to see the practice of medicine being conducted at such a great medical institution.

How did these various projects fit into my career path? Going into this internship, I was intent on become a physician and working in an academic setting, and wanted to reduce the healthcare disparity between LGBTI and non-LGBTI people. As such, I wanted to prepare myself for medical school and beyond by better understanding how LGBTI people from all
backgrounds experience the medical system. This internship allowed me to see concrete steps that can be taken to improve the way the healthcare system serves LGBTI people, steps which I can later act upon as a physician. Outside of that broader perspective, I want first and foremost to become a culturally competent physician, one that can advocate and support all LGBTI patients as well as patients from other underserved backgrounds. Working closely with LGBTI community members in Nashville, I listened to many stories about LGBTI peoples’ experiences in healthcare, which I know I can take into my future practice as well.

Given my career goals, the projects I worked on helped me better understand the current state of LGBTI healthcare and gain insight into ways we can improve, especially in the transgender healthcare sphere. Additionally, the program coordination and research skills I gained from working with TBP and in LGBTI research gave me to skills to enact tangible change in the future. The skills I gained doing everything from organizing a peer advocacy network to developing surveys and research studies from scratch will translate directly into my future work as a physician and researcher. In research especially, having the opportunity to immerse myself in a topic and craft a manuscript as first author — from literature review to publication — gave me the skills to succeed in future scholarly projects.

In the broader context of RRASC, this internship helped me delve deeper into RJ/SJ issues. While neither VUMC nor Trans Buddy were explicitly RJ/SJ organizations, it became clear to me how broad an area RJ/SJ really does cover. After attending the CLPP conference as part of RRASC training, I saw that many aspects of my internship, whether that be improving access to healthcare for trans folks or educating the public on LGBTI health concerns, did all tie back to RJ/SJ in one way or another. As an RJ/SJ newbie prior to this internship experience, I definitely came away from it with a more solid understanding of the importance of such
intersections, and will know how to incorporate this work into whatever direction my future career takes me.

In terms of general internship impressions, I couldn't have had a better summer working for the Trans Buddy Program! First of all, my summer in Nashville was a ton of fun, and I tried to use my weekends to hike, go downtown, and take full advantage of the city while I was there. In terms of the actual internship, the work was extremely engaging, and I never felt like I was being given busy work or thrown into difficult projects without support. My projects resulted in meaningful change in the organization, and it was a healthy work environment as well. My supervisors were keen on helping me make the most out of my internship, and were super receptive to connecting me to projects and opportunities that I was interested in. While my official intern duties revolved around the Trans Buddy Program, some of my most meaningful experiences, including attending grand rounds, shadowing physicians, and conducting research, came about because I asked to get involved with them.

On that note, one big piece of advice I have for future Trans Buddy Program/Program for LGBTI Health interns is to self-advocate! One of the biggest strengths of this internship is that you are working alongside some of the greatest minds at a powerful medical research center. Whether you want to shadow a physician in some obscure specialty or work with a partner clinic on an HIV/AIDS project, take advantage of where you are and let your supervisor know what you want to get involved in. One of my most worthwhile research projects came out of me just asking to do it, so I encourage you to find what you might be interested and find a way to get involved!

Another piece of advice I have is to take care of yourself. This internship coincided right with my medical school applications, so I definitely had to balance that with the internship. On
from work, I would spend 8 AM to 5 PM at work, have a little bit of time to myself, and then would spend the rest of the night working on applications, which started to get tiring after a couple of weeks. To make sure I was taking care of myself, I made sure to disconnect from my internship outside of work hours (i.e. not checking work email, working on projects, etc.). This not only helped me function at my best when I did go to work, but helped me establish a positive work-life balance so I could give my best effort to my applications and take advantage of the fun parts of Nashville as well. I say this all as a reminder to future interns: be aware of how you are doing mentally and physically, communicate your needs with your supervisor, and try to maintain a healthy work-life balance. It will help you get the most out of your internship and make your summer a memorable, fun, and positive experience!

It’s hard to pick one project or experience from this summer that really stood out to me since they were all incredible, so I’ll keep it more general. Being able to work at a world-class institution, with the resources to help me realize actual change and supervisors who were willing to support me made for an exceptional internship experience. The VUMC has an impact not only in Tennessee, but across the nation, so being able to contribute to something so great was humbling and deeply rewarding. I also really enjoyed the people I worked with. Every mentor and staff member I worked with at VUMC was extremely kind and helpful, and I had an absolute blast working and exploring Nashville with other program interns. Because I was the only RRASC intern in the area, it was nice to be surrounded by other interns at my program who cared deeply about the issues I do, and we became instant friends. We did everything from eating fantastic Nashville food to hiking together, so it was nice to have a supportive group the moment I touched down in the city. From both a personal and professional perspective, my time interning
in Nashville was an absolute dream, so I couldn’t recommend it more highly for someone who is interested in LGBTI community activism/organizing, healthcare, or anything in between!