As my plane departed Gulfport, Mississippi, I was initially filled with a lot of anxiety and intimidation becoming just another intern in the rat race that is D.C.. To relieve that anxiety and feel a little inspired, I decided to listen to Hamilton on the way. I managed to finish the entire show and felt slightly more empowered. This tension, though, characterized my experience in D.C. — trying to not feel like my effect on a large-scale organization was a lot smaller than I hoped for, especially for an organization as large as Amnesty International. This internship, in this aspect, taught me a lot about how to orient myself and set meaningful expectations for work in large organizations and social justice in general. The work I did complete satisfied me overall once I put my experience into perspective after leaving D.C..

Working in Amnesty International USA’s Gender, Sexuality, and Identity Program, we were a relatively small team, comprised of our supervisor Tarah, her full-time staff member Kaitlynn, and three interns. The work that our program was in charge of included reproductive rights, LGBTI (Amnesty’s official acronym which, in my opinion, is pretty exclusionary of other queer identities) rights, indigenous rights, and women’s rights. Thus, the projects and work that we engaged in were diverse because we had a lot of ground to cover with such a small group of people. The different categories of work that I engaged in were direct action, campaign building, research, and creation of external materials.

In direct action, I got to visit congressional offices on lobbying days to advocate for bills Amnesty is in support of, such as the Real Education for Healthy Youth Act (REHYA) that reallocates abstinence education funding to comprehensive sex education, and the Global Health,
Empowerment, and Rights Act (Global HER Act) that effectively nullifies the Global Gag Rule. In these meetings, I would meet with healthcare staffers of Senate and House offices. I was often entering into offices of Republicans that were hostile to the legislation I was advocating for. The skills I utilized in these meetings included interpersonal communication, audience analysis (as I was required to conduct research on the officials whose offices I was visiting), and researched argumentation.

Toward the end of the internship, we learned how to design campaigns using a variety of tools such as SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), Allies/Opponents, gender diversity, and race and justice analyses. We designed campaigns on how Amnesty could tackle the Global Gag Rule, the reform of Indian Health Services in terms of their processing of rape kits, and passing the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA). This campaign-building involved researching individuals and organizations that are sympathetic or hostile to the issue at hand and then assessing their overall influence to positively or negatively affect Amnesty’s overall goals. I also worked in ensuring that the action being taken was mindful of the effects on people of different identities, and that we are accurately representing the wants and needs of the communities that we are aiming to help. For instance, in the reform of IHS, we assessed that our leadership does not reflect the population of Native folk that we are aiming to help. Thus, we were forced to reconcile that and assess how much of an obstacle that would be to enacting the change that we wanted to enact. The skills involved in this process included critical self-evaluation (as an agent of Amnesty, that self-reflection was a reflection of the larger organization), power analysis skills, and planning (after identifying targets, we created a timeline of when we would take actions by certain days). These campaign plans are going to be utilized by the next intern team over the next year in tackling these issues.
Much of this internship was research-heavy for Amnesty’s internal use in planning and coordinating campaigns. For instance, one of the biggest documents I constructed was an analysis of abortion’s place in international human rights dialogue, and how international law has been applied to access to abortion over the last ten years (the last time that Amnesty changed its policy regarding abortion). The revision of Amnesty’s policy was the biggest reason that I was given this project, as it was due to come up for review over the summer. I’m not sure what the outcome of that review was, but the report that I constructed was used by our supervisor in suggestions for policy changes. Another report I worked on was assembling a list of accomplishments by the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues that was under threat of having its budget zeroed out by the Trump administration. What made this research project particularly difficult was the State Department’s overall inability to keep accessible and easily obtainable records of its practical accomplishments. There was plenty of information out there about the TYPE of work that GWI does, but there wasn’t much out there about the RESULTS they achieved. I also assembled opposition research on several Republican senators and representatives in order to know who to target and what issues to emphasize when lobbying for certain actions.

Finally, as an intern, I was assigned with creating external materials that would be distributed to Amnesty’s membership. This took the form of creating email actions, issue briefs, and one-pagers. Due to the international nature of the issues being discussed in these external documents, I had to create language that would be accessible by the member base while capturing the nuance and urgency of these human rights issues, such as relating how our members need to support worker protections for LGBTQ+ folk in Japan, where anti-queerness is taught even at the earliest stages of education. This required skills in audience analysis,
designing aesthetically pleasing and easy to read templates, and meeting the design standards that Amnesty International has for these kinds of external materials.

I had some difficulties during the internship. My supervisor gave us a lot of freedom in doing what we usually wanted to and giving us direction whenever we completed one big project, but due to her hectic schedule, we were directionless on more than one occasion. So I would usually jump onto a project with one of my two coworkers when I found that I had nothing to do. Another difficulty had to do with getting acclimated to all of the other interns in the office because there were so many of them doing so many different things at once. We had big get-togethers every now and again, but the social climate of the office always had an underlayer of awkwardness to it. Ultimately, it just came down to me and the other two interns in the GSI Program hanging out. One of the final huge difficulties that I encountered was running out of my stipend three weeks before the end of my internship. D.C. was far more expensive of a city than I was anticipating. With the help of my sister and my aunt, I was able to finish up my time in D.C., but not without really having to experience what financial struggle so far away from home and a safety net feels like.

The highlight of my internship experience definitely came in the form of self-discovery. Honestly, being on my own and so far away from home, I discovered many things about myself, both good and bad. I discovered how self-sufficient and creative I can be when faced with lots of free time. I also experienced a deep depression at a certain point, where I really tackled a lot of dark parts of myself that I had never had to confront before. Both the positive and the negative aspects of my self-discovery gave me much more insight into areas of growth that I can make as a person, not only to better myself, but to make myself as effective as possible working in reproductive justice and social justice more broadly. During the CLPP conference, we spent a
few hours during RRASC training talking about self-care and how important it was. It wasn’t until I was working and having breakdown after breakdown that I really came to appreciate that workshop and implementing some of those ideas. If I am not emotionally sound and at peace, there is no way that I will be able to effectively fight for reproductive justice.

Another major highlight of this internship was the roundtable discussions and presentations that I got to go to all throughout the summer. From Planned Parenthood’s workshop on campaign-building, to a sex work town hall, to a discussion on the movement for abortion rights at the intersection of faith, the public events that D.C. held, completely free of charge, imparted valuable information that I can use when engaging in conversation and activism. During the summer, it was so easy for me to view those types of events as supplementary to my work, but now, I honestly view them as critical parts of my experience this summer, as I used the knowledge and frameworks provided at those talks in my own work.

My final highlight of the summer came in the form of seeing the politics of the left being tested during Capital Pride with No Justice No Pride’s blockading of the parade on Saturday, a test that I don’t see much in South Mississippi. As I had recounted in my Week 1 Report:

“We all went to the Capital Pride parade yesterday. Interestingly enough, I actually witnessed the first barricade by No Justice No Pride that blocked the D.C. Parade. I haven't been to a pride event that large, let alone witness that kind of confrontation. It was interesting to see the response that that protest elicited from parade goers, many of which were being incredibly ugly and not even attempting to understand the protesters' reason for blocking the parade.”
Getting to see this conflict really inspired me to explore the philosophy of “shake shit up,” of not being afraid to disrupt spaces of left-wing activism when they are actively being exclusionary of other marginalized folks.

Several aspects of my academic career helped me in different parts of my internship. Two major avenues of my academic career I would like to highlight would be my experience in Speech & Debate and my Communication Studies major. Speech and Debate gave me a good background in assembling research in an organized way and categorizing information. Case-building was a major part of my lobbying experiences; I crafted a central thesis statement supported by evidence specific to the certain congressional member whose staffer I would be talking with. Another major aide in those lobbying visits was my knowledge from Communication Studies. Understanding how to interpersonally connect with people (in this case, staffers) is an incredibly important skill that I gained in my classes. In my other work, knowing the ins and outs of communication has been a massive benefit. Knowing how to manage my relationship with my coworkers and supervisor through effective communication practices made my work experience better in both efficiency and emotional satisfaction.

This internship was the first official organization that I worked for in advocacy. Having Amnesty International USA’s GSI Program on my resume alone is enough to give me a lot of credibility when applying for jobs in the field of reproductive justice and human rights after I graduate. The skills that I gained in research and advocacy are going to serve me well beyond this summer. Furthermore, this summer also provided a better idea of what I want to do after I graduate. Originally, I was thinking about going to law school, but this work convinced me that working in nonprofit advocacy is the field that I see myself pursuing. My plan thus shifted to
working for a Mississippi-based nonprofit post-graduation for a few years and then pursuing a degree in Public Policy (better yet, one with a focus on Nonprofit Organizations).

My expectations of Amnesty International USA were much different than the reality of the organization. Operating from a human rights framework did offer its advantages, such as being able to take into account cultural relativity when examining human rights abuses. For me, though, the framework ended up being more constraining that I would like. Radical thought and approaches were generally discouraged from being included in my projects. Also, it was definitely an office job more than anything else. There was not nearly as much on the ground action as I was hoping for. Overall, the experience was rewarding and important for me, but Amnesty International’s size and restrictive framework are aspects of an organization that I do not see myself working under in the future.

During my time at Amnesty, there were a few areas where I got to see the intersection of reproductive rights and other social justice issues. For example, when I was researching the change in abortion human rights dialogue among international monitoring bodies, I came across how these official structures and codified human rights bodies are so behind on the recognition of how critical abortion rights and the idea of bodily autonomy are in preserving the rights of marginalized folks of all societies. It shows how much work that we, as supporters of this movement for reproductive justice, have in not only blazing a trail of activists but also pushing the dialogue of human rights (which tends to get bogged down in the technicalities of documents that are decades old) toward a more radically liberating model.

My biggest piece of advice for future interns would be to take care of yourself. Taking care of yourself means a lot of different things. Do not think that you are not doing enough at work. That is the perpetual intern struggle, where you feel like you could be doing so much more
than you currently are doing. You are doing just enough, you beautiful human. Also, know when to take a day to just have fun or reflect on emotional experiences. The work you will be engaged in will be hard and dark and disheartening, so take a day or two to really put everything that you are doing and learning into perspective. Self-care is so important, and you will appreciate it.