

# Sharing my work as a researcher and reproductive rights advocate

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**Student VOICES, Student ACTION**

**Britney Sheena (SE '19)** is majoring in neuroscience and minoring in public health and Spanish. She hopes to work as a physician. This summer, she interned with Dr. Alyssa Lederer in reproductive rights and reproductive health.

This summer, I worked with Dr. Alyssa Lederer on sexual health education research. Unfortunately, the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is increasing for the first time in almost a decade. Young people are disproportionately affected by STIs, and sexual education is crucial to mitigate the contraction and transmission of these conditions. Our primary project was conducting qualitative analysis focusing on college students' knowledge of STIs. Dr. Lederer designed a study to assess students' understanding of critical sexual health information before and after viewing an educational program. The uniqueness of our research stemmed from its design. While the pre- and post-test format provided quantitative data about particular knowledge items, open-ended questions allowed students to delineate information they explicitly learned as a result of the program. I spent many weeks categorizing the data to understand and then essentially quantify the responses based on themes I identified. While my area of focus was sexual education, I was exposed to a variety of research topics and methods within this broad, important subject. In addition to identifying college students' gaps in STI knowledge, my other projects were helping to develop a sexual communication measure for the National College Health Assessment (NCHA) survey, which will be used at hundreds of universities nationwide, and contributing to a family planning and contraception counseling grant proposal. Each task addressed a critical component of the research process, whether it was funding to start a project, instrument design to collect data, or analysis to present results. While

I enjoyed the autonomy of the position, I appreciated my weekly meetings with Dr. Lederer to discuss our findings. I am amazed at how much I learned this summer! In addition to learning a new data analysis technique, I expanded my research presentation skills and received a great introduction to the reproductive climate and movement. As a neuroscience and public health student, I have a profound appreciation for scientific advancement and how research can influence systematic practices.

I hope our findings inform health education and influence methods to limit the prevalence of STIs. While my desire to become a physician has not wavered, I now hope to explore the health field in the areas of health education and advocacy prior to diving into the medical arena. I was shocked at how deficient my own sexual health knowledge (as well as many of the participants) was prior to working on this project. I am fortunate to have been selected as a fall intern to follow my projects to completion. I hope to work with other reproductive health and rights interns to expose the Tulane community to the key issues we are working on. This internship also introduced me to the pervasive impact of reproductive health in society. Through conversations with Dr. Lederer, other interns, and guest lecturers, I learned how reproductive health and justice affect economic, housing, and criminal issues. I feel prepared and excited to continue as an intern and a reproductive health advocate, and I urge others to get involved through conversations, research, or activism to improve health and rights outcomes.

**"I learned how reproductive health and justice pervade economic, housing, criminal, and other issues."**

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I cannot believe I am over halfway through the Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health Internship for the semester. My work with Dr. Lederer has been an invaluable exposure to sexuality health education. Last blog, I wrote about the strides I have made in my scientific writing. At each weekly meeting, Dr. Lederer and I add to the manuscript, refining the introduction, methodology, and results. I value the collaborative process, as I have learned from her feedback and writing style, and

I hope these skills will inform future projects. Once, these sections are more solidified and polished, we will begin the work on the discussion where we can not only interpret findings and compare results to previous work, but also explain the implications of the research of sexuality education knowledge gaps and how health professionals can mitigate knowledge deficiencies.

As discussed previously, working on the manuscript has improved my scientific writing. The final product will be submitted to a scientific sexuality health education journal whose readership is primarily composed of researchers, clinicians, and educators to hopefully guide improved education practices. Nevertheless, writing for public audiences can be just as important as academic groups. Over the summer, the Media Specialist at the Newcomb College Institute asked to feature my work as a Reproductive Rights and Reproductive Health Intern in NEWCOMB Magazine. I was elated at the opportunity to share my internship experience with others. Over Homecoming weekend, the magazine was distributed and Newcomb alumni and Tulane parents read about my personal and academic progress from the internship.

In my short article, I discussed the individual projects that I completed or was working on with Dr. Lederer as well as the broader implications of the internship experience. I wrote of connection to a group of women leaders that shares the same passion for reproductive justice, but developed the interest from diverse pathways. I discussed the inspiring professionals who took time out of their work days to speak about health, housing, economic, and criminal justice issues and explained the obvious and (often) not so apparent connection of their work to reproductive justice. I am so grateful to be featured in the magazine and not only share my development as a researcher, but also my growth as a reproductive rights advocate. I will continue to share my engagement with the field whether it is in print, online, or in person.