This summer, I am interning at The Fenway Institute, the research arm of Fenway Health. I found the internship opportunity after looking at Fenway’s page on LinkedIn. Fenway Health was founded in 1971 as a free clinic with the belief that “health care should be a right, not a privilege.” It served the greater Fenway community, as well as the LGBT community and people living with HIV/AIDS. As a clinic, it served as a drop-in place for people to get STI screenings and general vital checks. Over the years, Fenway Health became a primary care facility, and now there are over 24,000 patients that come to it for their health care. Fenway offers an interdisciplinary approach to health care, with primary care, mental health care, optometry, and dentistry all within the same building.

The Fenway Institute, launched in 2001, is “an interdisciplinary center for research, training, education, and policy development, focusing on national and international health issues.” Specifically, the institute researches ways to give culturally competent health care to underserved communities, usually those in the LGBT community and those living with HIV/AIDS. Within the Institute, there are different “teams” such as epidemiology and behavioral health that focus on different sides of health care. At any given time there are up to 15 different studies in progress, with grants from places like the National Institutes of Health and the Harvard University Center for AIDS Research.

My official title is “Recruitment Intern for Epidemiology Team: Stronger Together.” My main focus will be on a study that focuses on the effect of couple’s therapy on the HIV/AIDS “cascade” (testing $\rightarrow$ link to care $\rightarrow$ treatment $\rightarrow$ adherence $\rightarrow$ suppression). But in the last 2 weeks,
I’ve already learned about the other studies within the epidemiology (epi.) team and have been trained in research procedures and protocol. For someone who does not come from a research background, this experience has already been breathtakingly eye opening to a possible career interest (and for someone going into his senior year of college, that is definitely a good thing!).

I initially started this internship with the idea that I would be doing a lot of venue-based recruitment (i.e., going to gay bars, clubs, etc. in order to recruit couples for the study). However, the study was approved without much venue-based recruitment. This made my job even more exciting because I am now a part of the study in a way that a “real” research assistant is. Unfortunately, I’m not allowed to interact with patients, but I perform a lot of the behind the scenes tasks in a study. I’m on phone calls with top HIV experts in the country, I help create surveys, and I create folders for patient intakes—just to name a few. With studies involving HIV prevention and medication adherence being so important, I feel lucky to be able to help in any way I can!

I chose to intern at The Fenway Institute because of the focus it has on the LGBT community and HIV/AIDS. While researching internships, I was motivated to find an organization that had a policy-oriented role in HIV. Though I ended up finding something on a more on-the-ground level (epidemiology), this has sparked a new interest that I’m very excited about. The epi. team has a number of studies dealing with HIV and different groups within the LGBT community. For me, getting first-hand experience and being present for the start of a study is very exciting to see; so far, it has allowed me to see the research process from the very beginning. On a more personal note, this internship has also helped me become more familiar with the health needs of and the health care disparities affecting the LGBTQ community.
I started working a week after I got back from a semester abroad in Spain. And I really had to hit the ground running and learn a lot of information quickly, because Boston Pride was the weekend after I started (that’s right, 5 days after I started). Pride is very important for the Institute because it gives us recruitment opportunities for people to sign up for our studies. I was amazed at how efficient and friendly everyone is here. My boss really helped me adjust and learn quickly. It was my first Pride and it was an amazing experience! Although I wanted to jump in with the parade, the other members of Fenway and I were at the tent near Town Hall, dancing and ready to recruit some people for our studies. We were probably having just as much fun anyway!

My three expectation for this internship are: (1) I will learn the ins and outs of an epidemiological research study, (2) I will be able to narrow down my interests within the field of human health, and (3) I will be able to experience the interplay between my knowledge of health policy and epidemiology from my coursework as an HSSP major and this experience. I think that internships are a very important process for someone to grow in their field/profession because it provides valuable real-world experience. I’ve learned about the quality checks and what happens within a research study in an Introduction to Epidemiology class, but I’ve now actually performed quality checks and they’ve showed me the substantial level of thought that goes into a study. If the past couple of weeks were any sign of how the rest of the summer is going to go, I am in for a thrilling time with The Fenway Institute.