I’ve seen the same stereotype for interns time and time again in movies and TV shows. For these characters, internship life usually includes making copies, getting coffee, and doing administrative tasks around an office. What’s fun about my job is that, although I make the occasional copy, I’m doing a lot more hands-on work than I expected. In my last blog, I wrote about how I was hired to do venue-based recruitment (i.e., going to gay bars, clubs, etc. in order to recruit couples for the study). However, a change in our grant from the National Institutes of Health meant the elimination of venue-based recruitment, because it allowed us to pull names from data we already had. So I became a “renaissance” intern for the epidemiology team.

On a typical day, I get into work around 9:15 a.m., check my email, check the study’s email and Facebook page, complete tasks that my boss has given me to do, perform quality control\(^1\) (QC) and quality assurance\(^2\) (QA) on different studies, and head home by 5:00 p.m. Of course the specific demands of any given day change, which is something I’m very happy about at Fenway—no day ever looks the same! At the beginning of my internship, I mainly tested study surveys to find errors and performed QC and QA checks on study visits. As my boss became more reassured by my work, she asked me to create surveys for a couple of the studies. For example, two of the studies I am working on are couples-based and designed to promote healthy sex choices. One is for trans* women and their cis-gendered (non-transgendered) male partners and the other is for male-male couples. In addition to the surveys, I created pre-screeners, which are used by study staff to determine a participant’s eligibility.

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\(^1\) A system of maintaining standards for a Research Assistant’s paperwork and bio-specimens.
\(^2\) The follow-up check to see if all standards were kept after mistakes found in QC were rectified.
Creating surveys has been one of my favorite tasks to do so far—specifically applying logic to the survey. Within survey design, logic is what makes certain questions appear (or not) depending on a person’s answers to previous questions. For example, one of the surveys I’ve worked on had general questions in the beginning and end, but had different lines of questioning in the middle based on one’s gender identity. Therefore, I added logic so that specific questions would only show for the gender identity a participant indicated. Specifically, for the trans* woman and cis-male partner study, the trans* woman line of questions ask more pointed questions about their gender identity than their partner’s questions do.

Other than survey design, I’ve had the opportunity to learn about biostatistics. There is a Harvard master’s student in infectious disease epidemiology on the epi team who has been nice enough to give me lessons in biostatistics and statistical software. This week I was introduced to R and STATA, two software packages commonly used for analyzing data. Next week I’m going to get a practice problem set from one of his courses to try out the software. Being introduced to this in a real-world setting before I even learn about this in school is an absolutely amazing opportunity. It also gives me an opportunity to get ahead in biostatistics and software packages before continuing to learn about them through my coursework at Brandeis. I think it’ll give me a competitive edge when applying to Master’s in Public Health (MPH) programs. For me, this internship is an amazing opportunity that’s allowing me to soak up a plethora of information. I’m going from task to task quickly (without making any mistakes thankfully!) because I’m excited to try something new and because I am trying to learn as much as I can before the summer ends.

On top of my work with Fenway, my boss and I have put together a list of MPH programs that I will be applying to this fall. This internship has helped me to realize that, within the somewhat heterogeneous degree that is the MPH, I am most interested in epidemiology—
least at this stage of the game. I am very grateful to be surrounded by people who really want to see me succeed and who will help me along the way. I believe all that I’m learning at Fenway is going to make me a stronger candidate for graduate school. My boss has really become a committed mentor to me, making sure I am understanding everything and learning a lot at work, and making sure I am not too stressed about my GRE studying (which I take in August). I believe the support I will get from her is one of the most crucial aspects to my application.

In my last blog post, I wrote about three expectations that I had for this internship. So far I’ve seen two of them come to fruition. First, I have attempted to narrow down my interests in epidemiology to the study of HIV and the communities it affects the most. Although I am still sorting through different universities, I am focusing on institutions that have a strong grasp of/influence on HIV research. Secondly, I have applied some of the basic biostatistics concepts I’ve learned in the classroom to my work at Fenway. While going through the software programs, the master’s student described incidence rate ratios, odds ratios, person years, t-tests, etc.—all terms that I was not only familiar with, but comfortable with calculating thanks to my coursework in Introduction to Epidemiology and Biostatistics and Population Health.

As the summer goes on, I am excited to learn more about biostatistics. I think that, once I am more proficient in basic concepts and more familiar with the different software packages, I will work on even more detailed aspects of the different studies here, such as quantitative analysis of data and creating tables for papers that are written. Although I’m comfortable with many of the tasks I am given, I’m acquiring new skills (i.e., learning how to code and use statistical software) that will be beneficial later on in school. I also want to ask others on the epi team if they need help with their studies, to see different types of studies (e.g., regulations for participants, different populations, etc.). Seeing as I recently returned from Spain and can help
with translation, I’m also hoping to work on a study Fenway has in Peru. It’s amazing how just a
month ago I was astounded by all that the others on the epi team were doing; now I’m
performing all the tasks I saw them doing and more!