When I walked off campus after two weeks of Leadership and Global Health, I was inspired to improve the Sexuality and Health curriculum at my high school. I was prepared to use the resources of my club, Girls Achieving Leadership and Service, and the help of my own health teacher to analyze the issues in the curriculum. My main goal was to raise awareness about global maternal mortality, as reading about these tragedies during my course had shocked and motivated me.

However, when I began work on this project, I realized the lack of specificity I’d achieved during my time at Brown. In a world with thousands of problems and struggles, I’m sure I was not alone in feeling overwhelmed by the task of fulfilling an Action Plan. In all honesty, I felt lost. Luckily, within the first week of my junior year, I learned that my biology curriculum included a self-designed project. This Biology Current Issue (BCI) project gave me direction; it demanded that I choose just one issue.

I wanted to use this as an opportunity to continue my Action Plan work on women’s rights, so I chose menstruation. It’s ironic to me now, considering I witnessed multiple CVS runs to buy tampons during my time at Brown, but I’d never thought about how to make the painful process of menstruation into an Action Plan. But the very fact that I’d never considered this topic is a testament to my reasons for choosing it. I was interested in removing the stigma around a natural bodily process, researching the bodily and environmental effect of period products, and increasing accessibility.

I began research with two of my classmates, and over the course of three months, we explored historical menstrual practices around the world, the consumer market for period products, and the effects on health, wellness, and the environment. The “Hoosier Sanitary Belt,” a brass predecessor to the modern pad, was a particularly shocking discovery. As our research developed, though, it became clear that every aspect of menstruation is tied to the need for
menstrual equity, the safety and affordability of period products everywhere. When looking into pricing and the consumer side of periods, tampon pricing perpetuates economic inequality, as a lack of feminine hygiene products can keep women out of work. When we researched the health effects, our eyes were opened to a multitude of risks that went beyond Toxic Shock Syndrome that have slipped by without much research because the FDA does not require companies to release the ingredients in their menstrual products. In many parts of the world, girls miss school and contract life-threatening diseases due to lack of access to menstrual products. These products are a basic human right, and without them, people with periods are at a significant disadvantage when trying to work, go to school, or just live daily life.

I am fortunate enough that where I live in Massachusetts has no tampon tax, and most people I know have consistent access to period products. However, a lack of discussion around periods means that less research goes into the health of these products, and politicians are less likely to pass laws to increase menstrual equity. My Action Plan attempted to change that by generating conversation through a film screening of Period: End of Sentence. The film, produced by women working on “The Pad Project,” follows a group of women in rural India as they learn how to manufacture and sell their own pads. They not only increase access to these needs, but they gain confidence and autonomy as for most, this is their first time in the workforce.

My group reserved a lecture hall at my school for the screening, and we created posters to advertise the event. We asked for donations of period products to send to a local women’s shelter. We prepared a brochure with information about the film, definitions of menstrual equity, and how to help. We used two surveys (pre and post) to see how the film impacted our participants as their preconceptions may have been altered over the course of the event. We also created discussion questions that allowed our participants to reflect on the movie and their own experiences with periods. Since most of my peers have access to tampons and pads, we encouraged them to consider more environmentally and physically healthy methods such as organic tampons and menstrual cups. Our project concluded with a presentation to my biology class about our research findings and the event as a whole.

Although we didn’t reach the entire school, advertising for this event was in itself a method of achieving some of our goals. We needed to break past the discomfort and start a
conversation about periods, not knowing what the response would be. I often discuss my period freely with my friends, but it pushed me out of my comfort zone to announce the event in classes with people of all genders. Despite our initial hesitation, we built conviction over the course of the project, and this confidence and sense of inclusion was effective in recruiting participants both with and without periods.

My Action Plan did not turn out as expected, but I am so grateful to have found this wonderful film and to have shared this experience with two other inspiring women. I had an individual experience at Brown, so at first, it was weird to share my ideas with people who didn’t have a similar Action Plan process. However, these new perspectives and resources were critical to my success. For current or prospective Leadership Institute students, my advice would be to allow yourself and your ideas to adapt, and see where your Action Plan can take you. This project has opened my eyes to not only the political side of periods, but also the biological side, and it has sparked my interest in researching the chemical consequences of period products and finding better methods. The Action Plan is neither the beginning nor the end of my work in improving women’s rights, but it was a wonderful way to collaborate, take risks, and make positive change, which are three qualities that have improved my leadership for the better. I am extremely thankful for my experiences at Brown, my BCI group, and my privilege to have access to period products and be able to bring this issue to light.