

Pacific Institute Interviews the Inaugural Class of Diversity for Sustainability Interns



This summer, the Pacific Institute welcomed three interns for the inaugural year of the Diversity for Sustainability Internship Program. Dyamond Keith, Janett Nolasco, and Michael Wright worked on a variety of projects under the mentorship of Pacific Institute staff from the Water Program, Community Strategies for Sustainability and Justice Program, and the International Water and Communities Initiative. The following is an interview with Janett Nolasco and Michael Wright during their last week as interns. Ms. Dyamond Keith was unavailable for interview.

Q: It's hard to believe the summer and your internships are coming to a close. When you first came to the Institute, what were you most hoping to get out of your experience here?

Michael Wright: When I first heard about Pacific Institute, I didn't know what to expect because up until that point I hadn't considered environmental issues very much, mostly concentrating on social sciences in my studies. One of the first things I did when I started at the Institute was learn more about climate change and its effects. I was able to see how climate change affects people and communities on an everyday basis -- environmental science and sociology suddenly collided for me and I realized how passionate I was about all of it.

Janett Nolasco: I was very interested in Pacific Institute's work and excited about the work I would be involved with. I didn't realize just how interested I would be in the project that I worked on and how relevant it was to my studies and interests in Urban Planning and Architectural Design. This summer, I worked on a report documenting leaders in the field of urban agriculture and water management. I learned more about important urban issues and concerns, policy, and design. My experience has helped me understand the interconnectedness between many of the environmental, economic, and food access problems faced by cities like Oakland and Richmond. This summer has motivated to continue to learn and be proactive with that knowledge.

Q : You each worked with different mentors in different programs at the Pacific Institute. How do you feel like the internship program this summer has influenced your future as academics, environmentalists, and citizens?

MW: The Pacific Institute has been a very positive atmosphere to work in. It's full of people who are passionate and engaged with what they're doing, and that rubs off on you. My experience here has greatly affected my personal and academic interests – particularly how climate change affects low-income communities of color. Climate change not only affects current communities but future ones too.

Often times, marginalized communities who need resources the most are unaware of the information or programs available to them. I have lived in Oakland for the majority of my life, and before this summer, I had never even considered how climate change affects me and my world. I feel motivated to inform my community about the effects of climate change and encourage them to take an active role in addressing these issues.

JN: Personally, getting a higher education was a big step. Once I got to UC Berkeley, for me it was like, "Okay, you're here. What now?" I went in without much knowledge about my options and had no focus. After this internship, I definitely know that I'm interested in urban water issues and food policy, and I now have a better focus in my interest for environmental design. It's yet to be determined how I will apply my new gained knowledge and interests in my graduate studies but the Institute has definitely made me think about how to apply my studies to the ongoing concerns faced by urban communities.

Q: Can you describe the projects that you worked on this summer? What did you find most shocking or interesting about the areas that you worked in?

MW: Something that stood out in the research I was doing was how low-income and communities of color have little access, compared to middle class communities, to healthy food and things like air conditioning, especially for seniors and little children. There are programs but many people don't know about them.

JN: The Institute's Water Program came out with a report last year on [California Farm Water Success Stories](#) which documented several case studies on leaders in agriculture and water management. This year, the program is following up with more case studies, and I was in charge of writing the first urban agriculture case study. This case study turned out to be very different from previous case studies, and I definitely learned a lot in the process. Urban agriculture is everywhere around the world, especially in the global south. It's interesting to see how it has historically played out in the U.S. and how it's making a big come back today -- and where that movement is centered: largely in the Bay Area. The discourse around urban agriculture varies among the different communities who practice urban agriculture. It has been interesting to learn the potential urban agriculture has to approach many environmental, social, and economic problems faced by cities and to see how different organizations like Planting Justice and cities like Oakland are using urban agriculture to address concerns of Food Justice, Environmental Justice, and Economic Justice. While the potential is great, there is also a lot of room for improvement, in terms of access to resources and in particular to water and its management. Urban water for urban agriculture, much like large-scale traditional agriculture, is not well monitored and managed. There exists plenty of room for improvement which can make all the difference for a sustainable environment. A lot

of issues came up while doing the research for this project, one being access to healthy food. There are concerns about “food deserts” in cities like Oakland that lack access to fresh produce, as there are concerns about the current food systems and food production.

Q: You both bring up concerns that came out of your research. What do you see as possible solutions or next steps to these issues?

MW: In the long run, I’d love to see more outreach programs so residents can be aware of these programs which are in place, for them to be used. We need to find innovative ways to include youth in the conversation. The issue affects them and their future, and their kids’ future. We need to pass down the torch to help keep the movement growing. I know the CSSJ Program at the Pacific Institute tries to find ways to engage community through coalitions and networks they have with other organizations. We need to find more ways to get the community involved. Youth can contribute a lot of positive ideas to the movement.

JN: The various communities involved with urban agriculture are calling it different things, and have different motives, yet a common language would benefit multiple purposes. The disconnect between the language has resulted in clusters of groups practicing urban agriculture; it is important for communities to communicate with one another to unify the urban agriculture movement and be inclusive of everyone, so that people of all walks are included in the conversation. Urban agriculture is a powerful tool for cities.

Access to information and resources has always been limited to certain people. There are a ton of resources out there, but the people who need the information don’t have it. I think outreach is very important. Figuring out how to get the information to people who are affected by the issues that the Pacific Institute works on and getting them involved in these conversations is imperative. A lot of the information being produced circulates in a relatively small community of experts and people who are interested in the topics, but I can’t stress how important it is to make it available and comprehensive to the people who are directly affected by the things that are being researched and written about. Many underserved populations do not take part in conversations about climate change, water, jobs, etc. If people know about what is going on and how it affects them, they can be more inclined to put pressure on policy makers. Low income communities of color are usually more concerned with getting by day to day without focusing on the larger issues that have dramatic impacts on them in the long run. Knowledge is key.