An Internship in the Community

I spent the last four months working as the Community Organizing Intern with the Goddard Riverside Community Center SRO Law Project. The SRO Law Project offers low-income residents of single room occupancy (SRO) buildings and other low-income housing units on Manhattan’s West Side free legal services and assistance with tenant organizing in their communities. The project helps tenants fight illegal evictions, harassment, illegal construction, seek restitution for rent overcharges, and resolve issues such as lack of heat and hot water, and other poor building conditions. One of the project’s most useful endeavors is their efforts to improve and support tenant organizing and legal advocacy for low-income tenant groups, teaching them how to represent themselves before legislative bodies and officials.

As an intern, I was responsible for diverse tasks and given responsibilities and projects that changed almost daily. One of my main responsibilities as an intern was to learn as much as I could about housing laws and rights in New York City. I did this through updating, redesigning, and re-writing an expansive set of tenant-oriented flyers and briefs regarding NYC housing laws. I helped evaluate entitlements and rental problems of SRO (single room occupancy) and apartment tenants, negotiate with landlords, mobilize tenants for demonstrations, rallies and forums. I assisted in organizing efforts of SRO and apartment tenants/ groups through the creation of signs and pamphlets and by helping organize meetings with members of the community. I was often assigned individual tenant cases, in which I was tasked with researching the specific laws and rights that applied to each case. I often participated in organizing building meetings through letter writing and phone backing, conducted phone and in-person outreach to tenants building and community wide, and assisted in filing applications with the necessary governmental regulatory agencies that oversee housing laws. When I
was not busy on one of these many projects, I would often assist with administrative and other various tasks around the office.

I have interacted closely with New York’s housing infrastructure and policy during my four years studying Urban Studies at Columbia. One of my main interests in the study of cities is how resources are divided, awarded, and delivered to urban residents, and the disparities that arise during and after this process of distribution. I am especially interested in narratives of resistance that arise when disadvantaged populations insist on their rights within the urban sphere. Working with the SRO Law Project gave me the chance to interact in a practical and first hand manner with this subject matter. This internship allowed me to step outside of the vague world of academic theory and into the very tangible world of process, protest, and activism. I utilized my Spanish language skills, interacted with diverse clients around the city, and learned in great detail how to navigate the very complicated system that is the New York City Housing Authority. There is no better way to understand your studies than by stepping outside of books and discussion and into actually doing.

From this experience, I was able to better gauge where I might go in my professional future. Perhaps most instructive, I learned what to expect when pursuing a career in social justice. I spoke frankly and in-depth with my supervisors about how long they planned to stay in their positions, and in which direction they hoped to grow. They shared their backgrounds, and helped guide me towards more concretely considering how I might like to pursue my professional future.

Although I worked mainly with the community organizing team at the SRO Law Project, I was also able to interact quite frequently with the in house legal team that works with low-income tenants on more technical cases. My discussions with them helped me better understand what a career in social justice might look like, and the many possible trajectories that could take me in that direction. Social justice is an expansive term, and the opportunities I had to identify the actual positions and skills that will allow me to step deeper into the field were an invaluable facet of my internship experience. I was
surrounded by capable, friendly, and instructive supervisors who gave me frequent and helpful guidance related to my future professional life and this in itself made the internship worthwhile.

This internship helped me learn to be more comfortable in my own skin in a professional environment. I try to take each new professional opportunity presented to me as a new chance to more deeply understand the social dynamics of a certain field or profession. In my position as an organizing intern, I strengthened my researching and writing skills, became acquainted with the processes and protocol of the office, and grew more comfortable in my ability to make autonomous decisions while working on independent projects. I was given feedback from my supervisors about what I needed to work on, and tried to use this feedback to grow into a more capable intern. Taking productive criticism to heart is a challenging process, and I attempted to use this internship as an opportunity to grow in maturity and patience. While I am not sure if I succeeded or not, I feel the process of internal reflection will nonetheless be beneficial to me as a student and employee going forward after university.

Coming away from this internship, I am certain of several things. My passion and intention to work with low-income and otherwise disadvantaged populations has increased substantially. I am now not only aware of the problems faced by these populations, but am more equipped to help them find solutions to their issues. I am committed to fighting for more just and fair housing laws, and for more equitable cities in general. This internship focused on housing, but more importantly it serves as a resource for the local community in need. As a community center, the Goddard Riverside organization can direct and guide people in the direction they need to go. I was inspired by the dedication I encountered during my internship with this organization. I am excited to help continue, in whatever form my work eventually takes, their mission into the future.