

Chelsey Klimowicz
Garden Liaison
Chancellor's Undergraduate Internship Program (CUIP)
PICA Resident 2012 - 2014

PICA Assessment

During the 2013 - 2014 academic year, PICA conducted a yearlong assessment of the program's strengths and areas for improvement in order to prepare for the possibility of not being able to come up with funding for a staff position, as well as to orient the next group of PICA students to what could be restructured, removed, or altered. Throughout the year I conducted focus groups with PICA alumni, PICA residents, the PICA Leadership Team, and campus gardeners who attended Gardeners' Alliance meetings to gain insight and feedback from a variety of students.

PICA alumni were invited to attend a potluck that followed a garden workday, where they were asked questions about how PICA has impacted them. Those who were unable to attend had the option of completing a questionnaire online. Looking around the room I immediately noticed that four out of five of the focus group participants currently live together in a PICA-inspired off campus garden cooperative called "The Meder House" on 518 Meder Street. This is not a special case, as PICA students have had a history of starting house gardens in Santa Cruz when they finish the program. These students explained that they gained gardening skills, communal living experience, exposure to vegetarian cooking, and professional references which contributed to the overall happiness of their lives after PICA. One former resident conveyed that "PICA has changed my entire perception about the food system. It has helped me eat more healthy and sustainably. It has taught me how to garden. Most importantly, it brought me awareness of the importance of my where my food comes from and where the

waste goes.” This statement seemed to hold true with other members of the group, many of which provided similar accounts.

PICA residents were invited to attend an Avant Gardeners: PICA Community Meeting to participate in a world cafe style discussion regarding what has been going well and what can be done differently. Similarly, students who were unable to attend this meeting had the option of completing a questionnaire online. Many students agreed that the community meals program was an area of strength for the residential program. One resident declared that “Community meals are great to come home to after a busy day and it is really rewarding to cook for all of your friends a few nights out of the quarter.” However, some of the same students who praised this element of the program felt frustration and said that “Community meals may need more structure to keep everyone who's cooking on the same page.” In addition, several students expressed a need for a more democratic decision making process in general - especially in regards to what is planted in the garden, what workshops are offered, and what is bought in bulk. Another resident put this into words by stating that “The community needs to be asked about how things [should] happen. This year everything seemed to be decided by the leadership positions and this should not be the case. They need to be consulted on everything: what is planted, what bulk food to buy, and then the leadership staff needs to follow through with these requests.” Lastly, many students said that they “think the Residential Community was weakened this year by the inactivity of many residents in B3.” It was unclear to the community if students who lived in B3 did not want to participate or if they did not apply to live at PICA at all. Some of these students offered solutions to this dilemma, including: quarterly community potlucks and residential workshops in early fall.

During a PICA Leadership Team meeting, student leaders were asked questions about how PICA has contributed to their professional development and how PICA programs could be

restructured next year. The Leadership Team requested that the residential community organize more casual potlucks, so as to build relationships with other PICA residents. Members of the residential side of the team (i.e. Community Meals, Resident Assistant, Events, & Liaison) proposed holding their own “Community Team” meeting, similar to the “Garden Team”, where they would be able to have more space to co-create and plan the year’s events. The team recognized that the compost pick-up system should be restructured, in order to allow for more equity of labor and efficiency. The team also expressed a desire to get more PICA residents and Village residents involved in the garden. Some ideas around getting more involvement from Village residents Include: gifts (i.e. potted succulents), study parties, and holding workshops in different quads. Most members of the team agreed that they gained experience in grant writing that would benefit them if they decided to work in the nonprofit sector in the future. Three out of the seven team members felt that they gained experience in event planning. Students said that they also gained the following skills: facilitation, collaboration, public speaking, time management, record keeping, responsibility, and accountability.

Overall PICA students said that they valued learning professional skills, providing opportunities for residents to learn to cook for a crowd using plant-based ingredients, offering consistent skill-sharing through garden workday groups, and creating a sense of community that one may not find in the traditional dorm setting. In addition, PICA has a rich alumni legacy that encompasses communal houses with gardens off-campus, which includes the well-known “Food Not Lawns” house on Laurel Street.

Attendees of the Gardeners’ Alliance were asked to anonymously submit a piece of paper to me with their opinions/perceptions of PICA. This perspective was instrumental to learning how students outside of PICA view the program within the realm of campus gardens and the sustainability movement. These students remarked that PICA is a welcoming

community, where student leaders are “active, engaged, knowledgeable, and organized.” One fellow campus gardener said that they “love that there are some many opportunities offered by PICA to students to become involved and learn about gardens.”

Attendees felt that PICA is “maintained in spite of adversity” and “needs more stable funding sources.” Finally, one student suggested that there “seems to be a strained relationship with The Village.”

PICA’s strengths lie with the residential community meals program, workday meals, and workday groups that facilitate experiential education/hands-on learning in the garden. PICA residents explained that they felt a “sense of community established by sharing food” with one another. PICAns and campus gardeners noted that PICA is successful at offering “opportunities for student leadership trainings.” PICA’s compost system has historically provided a strong composting program for all residents of The Village, which diverts waste from landfills and reduces carbon emissions. In the words of one PICA alumni member, “PICA provides a space for people who are interested in food systems to get hands on experience in working within a community to create best practices with application sustainable agriculture and food choices. The work days are a way to bring people together and teach skills about the sustainable agriculture.”

All groups agreed that PICA could improve in the area of outreach, in order to better advertise the programs and opportunities we have to offer. A Gardeners’ Alliance member pointed out that “not many students know about this great community.” On this topic, PICA residents communicated that sometimes emails with upcoming events go unchecked and explained that PICA is “trying not to use a lot of paper.” Many people expressed a need for better coordination with community meals, as far as increasing the number of attendees, creating a Google document with the residents’ contact information, and offering doodle polls to

decided on days and times. All groups agreed that there need to be more connections to other campus gardens. Ideas about how to this are discussed below.

PICA students acknowledged that sharing and trading resources (i.e. giving away extra compost and seed sharing) is a great way to interact with other gardens. Many PICAns identified a wish for collaborative workdays, be it mass attendance at other gardens' workdays, scheduled rotations, or coordinated volunteer exchanges. Another theme that came up with all of the groups was an aspiration to co-host events and to attend the events of other gardens in general. PICA students viewed the Gardeners' Alliance and the Student Gardens Market Cart as venues for working together with other gardens. PICAns said that they wanted to invite other gardens to attend community meals, potlucks, "open houses," and tours of the PICA gardens. Moreover, PICA students communicated an intention to create friendships with the other gardens by inviting them to casual residential events and hang-outs (i.e. tea parties, brunches, bonfires, & dances). Ultimately, building relationships with other gardens is about "being friendly, welcoming and open to teach and learn from each other."