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Building the Pipeline

In North Carolina, a regional science writers group is creating connections for HBCU students and science writing careers

By **Karl Leif Bates**

The idea is simple enough that just about everyone who hears it wants to take part: Recruit STEM majors from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and provide them with a paid summer internship in science communication.

What gets complicated is making it happen.

Our two-year-old program, now called the **SCONC/NASW Science Communication Internship**, grew out of the cultural and racial reckoning following the birth of #BlackLivesMatter. The leadership of SCONC—Science Communicators of North Carolina—had the idea to try to do their small part to try to make science writing more diverse and equitable. A \$3,000 Peggy Girshman Idea Grant awarded by NASW in 2021 helped us get our planning started.

Our inspiration was a long-standing internship program at Duke University

that places communications majors from its neighboring HBCU, North Carolina Central University (NCCU), into working communications offices at Duke. The Dr. Mac Fellowship, which I manage at Duke, is now in its 16th year and has mentored 200 NCCU students. At least 10 participants have ended up working for Duke, while others have gone on to careers in news media and public relations.

Building the Model

The older program at Duke has an established pipeline, including a pre-internship orientation for learning essential workplace skills, and the students all arrive with a modicum of communications background. The science writing startup took a little more work.

Our first connection was to SCONC board member Checo Rorie, who also happens to be the Chair of Biology at North



“We hope science communicators in other states could be inspired to replicate this sort of internship program”

Left to right: Five of the six 2022 SCONC HBCU interns: Sarah Jones, Jasmine Johnson, Eden Harris, Alessandro Figueroa, and Tarah Anderson.





Top: The 2022 program ended with a lunch and sharing session for interns and their sponsors. Sponsors pictured here with Jones, Johnson, Harris, Figueroa, and Anderson are Marie Claire Chelini (Duke Arts & Sciences), Fenella Saunders (American Scientist/Sigma Xi), Samantha Collins (NC State/Southeast Climate Adaptation Center), Karl Bates (Duke University), and Alyssa LaFaro (UNC Research/Endeavors).



“I am so grateful for this program for allowing me to network with so many different people and providing more insight about careers in science”

Carolina Agricultural and Technical State College (NC A&T)—the nation’s largest HBCU, in nearby Greensboro. With Rorie’s help, we built connections to instructors of the “Writing in the Sciences” courses at NC Central and at NC A&T and asked if we might put this opportunity in front of the students. The answers were a resounding yes.

We also reached out to SCNC members and their friends to ask who would be willing to take on undergraduate student interns with huge potential—but possibly zero training in communications or journalism. Again, there were a lot of “YES” answers. In our second year, four of the six sponsors and two of the six students came back.

Internship sponsors must be willing to commit significant money, time, attention, and long-term involvement to these students. The students only work 20 hours a week in part because we want the sponsors—who all have full-time jobs already—to really pay attention to them.

In the first-year pilot with our Ideas Grant, we had more sponsors than students, partly because of the difficulty of recruiting during a coronavirus surge and virtual classes. In year two, we had a lot more interest (60 names on our spreadsheet at one point) and have placed ten students.

Each sponsor wrote an enticing one-page job description about experiences ranging from university research offices to a magazine and private-sector healthcare communications consulting. The students then chose which three jobs they wanted to conduct Zoom interviews with. After sponsors ranked students and

students ranked sponsors, we matched everyone as highly as we could.

Initial Impact

The STEM majors, for the most part, have never heard of this career path, so part of the recruiting we do in January is just explaining the jobs and careers that are out there for professional translators of science.

“I was finishing my freshman year and I had no idea how I wanted to spend my summer last year,” said Eden Harris, a pre-health food and nutritional sciences major at NC A&T who landed an internship at Duke, helping the Center for Combinatorial Gene Regulation develop recruitment materials for a study.

“Interning with this center allowed me to enrich my web development and design skills, effectively communicate with team members, and create my own proposals for the betterment of the center! I am so grateful for this program for allowing me to network with so many different people and providing more insight about careers in science.”

Indeed, Eden came back for a second summer to continue working with the same team.

STEM faculty at HBCUs are increasingly being bombarded with attractive internship offers for their students. They’ve said they like that this opportunity is closer to home and not pitting their kids against a national pool. A virtual internship fair hosted by NC Central, for example, had the SCNC program presenting alongside the SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, the Broad Institute, Michigan Medicine, and more. The demand for these students

has grown hugely, but the competition is also fierce.

The year two program also increased support for the students. In addition to being paid \$17 an hour for 20 hours each week, each student will receive two payments for help with living expenses, totaling an additional \$3,500. This grant support from the Burroughs Wellcome Fund means the students should have the wherewithal to rent housing for the summer with money left over for meals and transportation. Their total compensation for the summer is just under \$7,000—at pace with a \$35,000-per-year salary. This seems to have deepened the pool of interested students and attracted better candidates. “Students who weren’t taking classes had experienced housing costs last summer that put some of them underwater for the internship, and we just don’t want to do that,” explained Jenny Cox, treasurer of SCONC.

Forward Momentum

The ten students this year will have been introduced to the basics of science

communication in a one-day orientation in early June—and then embedded in working communications offices across the Research Triangle. Three have been placed with NC State University, three with Duke, one with UNC-Chapel Hill.

And, in one experimental departure from the model, the SCONC/NASW program also sent one intern to Stony Brook University on Long Island to work with the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science.

“This was just a pilot last year and we had no intention of immediately ramping up to a national model,” Cox said. “So the SCONC leadership weighed this opportunity for a while, but the Alda offer turned out to be too attractive to pass up, and several students took a shot at it.”

For this program to expand within North Carolina, or even nationally, it would require a lot more recruiting outreach and a lot more resources to provide the living allowance these students need. But the desire is there for both sponsors and students, and the program does work.

We hope science communicators in other states could be inspired to replicate this sort of internship program with HBCUs, Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs), Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), and other like partners in their geographic region. We’d be happy to answer any questions you have about how to get started.

We don’t expect most of the interns to suddenly switch to science writing, but we do think the experience will serve them well, regardless of their career goals. And at least one student from the first cohort has changed her goals toward science communication because she liked it so much. That’s one small step in the right direction.

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Karl Leif Bates and Jenny Cox are longtime SCONC board members. Jenny, a former NASW board member and NASW Diane McGurgan Service Award recipient, is a retired PIO from NC State Engineering. Karl is the executive director of research communications at Duke University and manager of the two HBCU internship programs described here.

2023 SCONC/NASW Summer Science Communication Interns

TeCora Galloway (NC A&T)
NC State/Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Center

Raven Baez (NC A&T)
NC State/IR-4 Pest Management for Specialty Crops

Kareem Dudley (NC A&T)
NC State Center for Human Health and the Environment

Kaylie Shoffner (NC A&T)
UNC-Chapel Hill — Research Communications, Looking Forward

Yesenia Garcia (NCCU)
Group 31 Communications

Candace Nimons (NC A&T)
Stony Brook University,
Alda Center for Communicating Science

Morgan Chavis (NC A&T)
Duke Heart and Vascular Center

Aneesa Shaw (NCCU)
Duke School of Medicine Grant Writing

Eden Harris (NC A&T)
Duke Integrative Genomics

Donovan Garner (NC A&T)
American Scientist Magazine, Sigma Xi

For news on SCONC and other independently organized regional groups, see the Regional Groups department in this issue on page 33.

For more about the Duke Dr. Mac Fellowship, visit: communicators.duke.edu/charmaine-mckissick-melton-communications-fellowship

2022 SCONC/NASW Summer Science Communications Interns

Morgan Chavis (NC A&T)
NC State/Southeast Climate Adaptation Science Center

Alessandro Figueroa (UNC-Chapel Hill)
Duke University – Research Communications

Sarah Jones (NCCU)
Duke University – Biology Department

Eden Harris (NC A&T)
Duke University Center
for Combinatorial Gene Regulation

Jasmine Johnson (UNC-Chapel Hill)
American Scientist Magazine, Sigma Xi

Tarah Anderson (NC A&T)
UNC-Chapel Hill – Research Communications,
Endeavors Magazine