

REFLECTIONS *on the* PHD STUDENT EXPERIENCE: Calling for a Dialogue on Diversity, Labor Practices, and the Future of Social Justice Scholarship

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Author's note: Since the findings of this report were first discussed new developments, from the Trump administration's immigration policy to Charlottesville, add a sense of urgency to these comments. The productive discussion generated among students and faculty also gives us a sense of hope and confidence in how we are working to confront these issues.

As doctoral students in Urban Planning at UCLA we celebrate our department's unique role in the production of critical and engaged planning knowledge and practices. This understanding is founded on a vision of planning as a powerful tool for building more socially just and empowered communities. A mission like this cannot be taken lightly as it implies imaginative resistance to dominant paradigms of planning knowledge production. Throughout its proud history of critical scholarship, UCLA Planning has formed its academic identity on the basis of this mission. Themes and values such as socio-spatial justice and empowering historically marginalized communities are understood as axiomatic truths in our program. Unapologetically bold, creative thinkers such as Jacqueline Leavitt and Edward Soja helped define UCLA Planning's leading role within the discipline. Through their work, they advanced the notion urban planning as a field rich in scholarship and as a means of activism responsible for telling the stories of the marginalized, resisting oppression, and pushing planning conversations outside of the assumptions of capitalist discourse. Beyond their own influential scholarship, they tirelessly positioned themselves to defend our ability to broaden the horizon of planning thought and practice. This tradition continues today in the work of research centers within and connected to our department that promote the study of socio-spatial inequality, displacement, labor and social movements from both a local and global perspective.

What we assert here is that planning doctoral students have played a role in this project, and that today UCLA's planning legacy of critical scholarship is challenged by structural changes within the academy. Moreover, the current political environment demands that we reflect and consider how we are confronting these challenges both within our department and externally through our research and practice. As the dominant political regime solidifies the position of cities as sites of worsening social disparity, the field of planning and its scholarship must focus its research agenda on the task of dismantling systems of oppression that support urban poverty and racialized state violence. Further, the Trump administration's unwillingness to forcefully denounce hate groups is counter to the social justice aspirations of the faculty and students of the UCLA Department of Urban Planning.

The intention here, then, is to engage in a reflexive exercise, one that helps us evaluate where we, as a program and department, find ourselves in this project to dismantle such systems. To this end, we conducted a survey of doctoral students in our department to understand their experiences as key agents in continuing the mission of creating critically-engaged scholarship concerned with the creation of just cities. We understand this as the opening of one of many windows into the internal workings of our program as a means of engaging the structural and systemic challenges to production of socially engaged and justice oriented planning theory and practice. Though UCLA in its legacy of justice oriented planning serves as the case, the concerns discussed here are quite universal. As such, we hope that these observations will help begin conversations beyond the department, to the many other institutions facing similar challenges.

THE REPORT *on the* PHD EXPERIENCE

As doctoral students, we are an integral part of the research and teaching environment in the urban planning department at UCLA. We know that our knowledge and skills are invaluable. We support the work of faculty and research centers at UCLA as graduate student researchers and teaching assistants. Though essential to the capacity of practically all facets of this teaching and research institution, at times our roles are not valued as such.

Many doctoral students discuss the challenges of their programs, and share concerns about wages, workload and stress - often in confidence. But often, we don't hear much about these issues. It seems to us that the lack of communication and information about key challenges we face as doctoral students is a barrier to supporting each other as a community. We imagine that this is in part due to a broader academic culture that does not accept uncertainty

and insecurity as responses to the difficult and unusual environment we are confronted with.

In a changing political and economic environment where funding for our program has decreased, and job opportunities are fewer, we worry about the effects of these trends on our friends, our colleagues and ourselves. We are also concerned by the limiting effect in terms of diversity and fair labor practice. We know this changing environment potentially threatens the inclusion of historically underrepresented groups in our program, and by extension, impede the tradition of social justice scholarship at UCLA.

Concerned with the effects of this changing environment felt by institutions across the country, we conducted an anonymous survey to better understand the challenges that doctoral students face in several areas, most notably funding and labor practices.¹ In a telling moment of the doctoral program's lack of diversity, the race of participants was not able to be included in the questionnaire, since questions about race would compromise the small portion of non-white students' anonymity. While we don't believe the lack of diversity to be the result of discriminatory admissions practices on the part of individuals, we understand funding shortages of public institutions to exclude financially disadvantaged groups. This exclusion then becomes racialized by definition. The results of the survey suggested unequal and inadequate funding opportunities among students. They also pointed to feelings of alienation related to lack of race and class diversity. Further, it posed concerns about the lack of open and honest discussions regarding the intersection of diversity issues and financial burdens of a doctoral education.

The report found that the doctoral program presented significant financial challenges for students. Seventy percent of doctoral students find that their initial funding offers are inadequate to support their tuition and living expenses.² Compounding this issue, when asked about the strength of their social safety net only 25% of students responded definitively that they could rely on friends and family for financial support. For the 40% of doctoral students who have financial dependents, 92% can not uphold their obligations to their loved ones. Despite what many students described as a "collaborative"

1. Twenty six of 36 doctoral students were able to participate. These participants were split about evenly among males and females, and about 20% of participants were international students.

2. These funding packages are an initial baseline. Depending on the specifics of the funding, students are expected to enhance that income through paid positions that are often available, but not guaranteed.

and “positive” relationship with their advisors and employers, 41% of students working as teaching assistants and 18% of graduate student researchers (GSR) report getting paid for fewer hours than they work. We do not believe the underpayment of graduate students is the result of intentional exploitation. On the contrary, we know many faculty members who have expressed deep concern about fair compensation for hours worked. Instead, this is a likely consequence of academic culture that does not openly address such issues, making it difficult for students to communicate with their supervisors about work load. In fact, about one third of students reported that they would find it difficult to refuse additional work requested by their advisor. The steep economic challenges here rooted in academic culture are not independent of the lack of race and class diversity that some students mentioned in their surveys. Several students felt that there was an obvious lack of support for students from historically underrepresented communities, and that the culture of the program felt “hostile towards students of these backgrounds”.

These findings paint an image of the burdens of financial strains and emotional stress caused by a doctoral program. One student described the lack of financial opportunity: “There is quite simply not enough internal or extramural funding to cover the costs of research, writing, and a basic life”. Other students noted restrictions on funding that limit income by design, such as limits on total income enforced by the Graduate Division and funding restrictions for international students. Consider the difficulty this poses for students with financial obligations beyond cost of living for one individual, such as the considerable portion of students we know to have financial dependents, a double burden for international students with visa restrictions on family members’ ability to work in the United States. Further, research and teaching positions that are 25% (10 hours/week) appointments or more require the employer to cover the fees and health insurance of the student (\$5,146 quarterly). About two thirds of teaching positions offered to urban planning doctoral students are only for 7 hours/week, costing students compensation in lost wages, fee remissions and health insurance.

To reiterate, these conditions are not likely unique to UCLA, nor the result of actions of individuals; they are a look at the broader processes of disinvestment in public institutions and the reliance on donors and other funding institutions under increasing fiscal distress. The challenges discussed here are not because of lack of concern or faculty support, but in fact they are in spite of it. Doing what they can to assist students financially through funding and work opportunities, many faculty members are gravely concerned about the economic realities faced by doctoral students. The report has already been

met with concern and support by many faculty members, as well as suspicion. Thus far, it has sparked conversations between students and faculty. We hope these discussions will continue with the aim of engaging these challenges in an honest and supportive way, while reflecting on our departmental identity.

IMPLICATIONS for PLANNING EDUCATION and PRACTICE

As integral parts of the academy under a time of increasing fiscal stress for public institutions, low wages for graduate students become commonplace, and are accepted as essential to the bottom line. These labor practices are normalized and worked into the bureaucratic fabric of educational institutions and framed as rights of passage rather than low road labor practices. As a response, across campuses, graduate students have formed unions and organized around similar issues to those raised by the questionnaire, from wage theft to loan forgiveness. However, these unfair practices are normalized as an acceptable status quo for graduate students. If this is the case, then perspectives from this study indicate that it is one that is increasingly hostile to students of color, students of working class backgrounds and women, all of whom have traditionally been excluded from higher education.

Although we were unable to collect self-reported racial demographics of the doctoral students due to the previously mentioned concerns of anonymity, we can observe that the doctoral students are far less racially diverse than even the undergraduate student body that has raised some eyebrows in recent years for its lack of diversity, despite UCLA touting a progressive reputation³. By quickly perusing the PhD profiles on the websites of other highly ranked planning programs, it would appear that they're not doing much better on the diversity front⁴.

What does race and class bias in the academy mean for the planning profession? What does it mean for our cities? What does this mean for the creation of planning knowledge, and who is allowed to take part in it? Though an obvious lapse in education accessibility afflicts higher education in general, the implications for these findings reach beyond the academy, sewing exclusion into the urban fabric they aim to mend. If, as the reputation of UCLA planning suggests, the department is strongly influential in terms of scholarship

3. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5563891>

4. It should be noted that the lack of racial diversity in the program implies an entirely separate set of challenges for members of historically underrepresented groups that weren't able to be questioned, since they couldn't surpass the systemic hurdles to take part in the program in the first place. This questionnaire by definition also omits perspectives from students who quit the program for various reasons.

and policy guides, then surely some repercussions of this disparity are being felt in our cities and the knowledge used to shape policy discourse.

As an inherently political endeavor, the framing of urban problems ripe for scholarly and practical exploration can not by definition produce socially just practices when they exclude the voices of people of color and discourage the participation of those with economically disadvantaged backgrounds. When planning knowledge is biased through its continual shaping by an elite, privileged social and racial class of intellectuals, it becomes difficult to argue that the scholarship it produces is rigorous in its own right. Further, when the strain of doctoral education excludes some from the development of planning knowledge, certain communities repeatedly become pathologized as the objects of study and critique, instead of regarded as actors who possess the necessary expertise to negotiate the difficult terrain of equity in our cities. In their ability as scholars that inform policy, educators that shape the worldviews of future planners and practitioners themselves, the diversity of and support for doctoral students is crucial to the fight for just cities. The resources available to current and potential doctoral students simply do not provide the necessary support for students from disadvantaged communities to demand socially just scholarship and practice in earnest.

The selection of planning issues that merit scholarship and whose agenda they represent, when repeatedly defined by privileged members of society, reproduces the policies that stratify our cities along race and class lines. What the bias in academic culture revealed by these findings imply is that as doctoral students, we are structurally constrained in our ability to select and determine the shape of research projects in which we invest our physical and intellectual labor. Must we be limited to the trend-conforming and capital-driven projects favored by foundations and funding agencies? Or, for example, are we free to consider how housing and economic policy continues to produce the racist, spatial segregation which contributes to the oppression of Black and immigrant communities in American cities? Are we free to determine how we study and interact with these communities? Are we limited to superficial interventions because the funding limitations drive our fleeting interests, or are we making meaningful engagements, sustained over time? It is in these questions that the financial and cultural deficits of the doctoral program begin to threaten the future of critical and justice oriented scholarship at UCLA.

PLANNING for the FUTURE of CRITICAL SCHOLARSHIP

However easy it may be to harp on the problematic implications for the

findings of this report, the way forward is considerably more tenuous and is both internal and external to the workings of the department. Internally, faculty members observed that both departmental budgets and the lack of viable external fundraising have resulted in lack of opportunities for doctoral students. Further, at a macro political and economic level, the tightening of state budgets and the difficulty of funding education more generally present significant obstacles to rectifying some of the issues that have long existed but come to light more vividly in this report. In terms of affirmative action type programs that aim to boost enrollment for historically underrepresented groups, California, along with a host of other states has outlawed such policies. With these restrictions in mind, along with the admissions process and funding arrangements that often occur between individual applicants and faculty members, we call for increased transparency and student involvement in the doctoral admissions process. It is also clear that the criteria for admissions at graduate institutions everywhere must be seriously reevaluated, and that departments must carefully take stock of the students they aim to attract beyond GRE scores or degrees from prestigious institutions prioritized over their ambitions of justice and inclusivity. When we focus on such things, we abandon the spirit of justice in favor of inter-university competition, homogeneity and elitism. The path dependency implied in perpetuating values that have allowed certain groups to dominate the production of planning knowledge does little for the pursuit of critical and progressive scholarship foundational to the urban planning department at UCLA.

In terms of the challenges presented regarding the trend of labor exploitation in the doctoral program, a deep cultural shift must take place. The issues of wage theft and uneven funding opportunities are not wholly separate from the issue of exclusionary admissions practices. If, as many believe, financial hardship comes with the territory of being associated with education at an elite institution, then participation in such institutions is by definition a race and class biased position. When getting underpaid for work done and under supported in terms of tuition becomes the norm, we also consent to the exclusion of groups too financially burdened to overcome such obstacles through their education. A competitive academic culture where students are perhaps overly eager to publish and to remain professionally amicable with their advisors further discourages open conversations about financial stress. We are hopeful that the release of this report to faculty and beyond will continue to encourage concerned and mutually supportive dialogues between individual students and their advisors. This is just the beginning of a cultural shift in reframing the current expectations of doctoral student labor practices. In beginning this dialogue, we hope that we may continue the legacy of

critical and inclusive scholarship of UCLA urban planning both for the future of our cities and in memory of the scholars that have inspired us to do so.