All Talk No Walk: Student Perceptions on Integration of Diversity and Practice in Planning Programs

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All Talk No Walk: Student Perceptions on Integration of Diversity and Practice in Planning Programs

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ABSTRACT
This paper summarizes findings from a nationwide survey of degree-seeking urban planning students regarding the climate for diversity within their degree programs. This study examines urban planning student experiences in the classroom, with communities, and with professionals as they are trained to become planning practitioners. From May to October 2016, we surveyed 451 students and conducted in-depth interviews with 27 students. Our results show planning students are concerned that ‘the talk that we talk’ does not always match ‘the way that we walk’ – the values that we espouse in the classroom do not always translate into connecting these values to planning practice, particularly when engaging in diverse communities. These accounts reflect a pedagogical gap in planning education, which continues to be an area in need of improvement as the communities served by planners continue to become more diverse. Our findings offer implications and recommendations to reconcile these barriers for urban planning institutions.

KEYWORDS
Planning education; diversity; survey; interviews; planning practice

Introduction

Planners work alongside community stakeholders to facilitate the development of plans to revitalize neighborhoods, cities, and regions. As communities become increasingly diverse, planning practitioners are faced with rectifying the effects of past social injustice and mitigating systemic racism, sexism, and class discrimination. Planners are also addressing new needs to ensure that residents of different backgrounds have a high quality of life. Promoting equity and social justice can remain core values of planning, yet a gap remains between how academic institutions train planners to work in diverse communities and become culturally competent practitioners. The planning academe has struggled with integrating practice-based curriculum that can train students to work in diverse neighborhoods. There has also been limited research on students and faculty experiences of diversity.
within institutions and how these experiences inform steps to bridge planning curriculum in higher education and culturally competent practices in the planning profession.

This paper addresses these issues in several ways. It draws from a nationwide survey of degree-seeking urban planning students with particular attention to the role of practice and integration of diversity into curriculum. We focus on the experiences of urban planning students and their perspectives of climate and diversity, interactions with students and faculty, and engagement with the broader public and professional planning community. By assessing student climate and diversity within our educational programs, our findings provide a relevant frame for how planning students will approach these issues in their professional careers.

This study was undertaken by the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) Planners of Color Interest Group (POCIG). In examining diversity within urban planning programs, we used a broad conception of diversity that includes race, ethnicity, national origin, citizenship status, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, age, family composition, marital status, and political beliefs, among others. This definition recognizes the intersectionality around identities and experiences of diversity within a personal or institutional context (Crenshaw, 1991; Hancock, 2007).

We first review existing studies examining the role of practice in urban planning education and further provide context on how issues of diversity are integrated into curriculum and challenges to do so. Next, we describe the study context and research methods undertaken. Then we outline our results, which show planning student concern that ‘the talk that we talk’ does not always match ‘the way that we walk’ – in other words, the values that we espouse in the classroom do not always translate into connecting these values to planning practice. These accounts reflect the continued pedagogical challenges to planning education and illustrate, that although institutions are training urban planners to work in communities – the questions remains whether institutions are adequately preparing students to work, thrive and succeed in their efforts to work in diverse communities. Without learning how to apply these skills, students are left unsure of how to connect course content to real-world projects and professional practice when needing to develop planning processes that are no one size fits all.

Moreover, students report the lack of integration of practice-based curriculum throughout urban planning programs and a lack of concerted effort to align coursework with skills and experiences needed for professional planning practice. These accounts reflect a significant pedagogical gap in planning education. We conclude with implications and recommendations to reconcile these barriers for urban planning institutions.

Integrating Practice into Planning Curriculum

Urban planning education trains planners on how to engage with real-world planning problems through a variety of pedagogical techniques (Friedmann, 1996; Myers & Banerjee, 2005; Edwards & Bates, 2011; Christensen, 2017). To train planners to be competitive in a dynamic marketplace, there is a pressing need to integrate planning practice into planning curriculum. There have been numerous reviews and commentaries about the ideal core curriculum in planning literature (Edwards & Bates, 2011).
Friedmann (1996) reviewed the core curriculum of 20 accredited planning degree programs in the U.S. and found that the substantive knowledge about the methods and skills required for planning practice were inadequate. He proposed teaching six socio-spatial processes to planning students. He also encouraged case studies, workshops, and field trips to overcome existing shortcomings. Likewise, to bridge the gap between planning education and practice, some planning educators have proposed to bring the practice into the classroom (Shepherd & Cosgriff, 1998; Hoey et al., 2016; Christensen, 2017). After surveying accredited U.S. planning programs, Hoey et al. (2016) found that due to the time-intensive nature of traditional field-based planning, applied work is not included in core planning courses. In this case, classroom-based pedagogies have aimed to facilitate in class scenarios. Shepherd and Cosgriff (1998) also stressed the importance of problem-based learning in the classroom as a way to improve the traditional planning methods of academic instruction.

To reconcile the gap between planning theory, education, and practice, numerous studies have been conducted by planning educators (Peattie, 1969; Graziano, 2008; Hamin & Marcucci, 2013). Reflecting on the importance of bridging these differences, Myers and Banerjee (2005) suggested collaboration between academia and planning professionals to train proficient students. The benefits of these partnerships between educators and professionals have also been recognized by Godschalk (2014). Additionally, Baum (1997) suggested integrating internships, studios and other experiential learning into planning curriculum will provide students the opportunity to combine education with practice.

Friedmann (1996) recommended a third year in the master’s planning program in planning education. Similarly, Baldwin and Rosier (2017) recommended integrating experiential learning to better facilitate the real-world application of planning theory. To better incorporate planning practice into education, Balsas (2012) evaluated the prospects of studio courses as a planning pedagogy. He examined an initiative at Arizona State University and argued that there was an influence of plan evaluation studios for effective planning practice. Another study by Long (2012) analyzed the studio courses in the U.S. based planning programs and found that most planning programs required only one studio course for graduate students. Németh and Long (2012) evaluated 44 syllabi for required studio courses in U.S. planning program. The study revealed that 84% of Planning Accreditation Board (PAB)-accredited planning program necessitates studio courses in the form of workshop, practicum or field-based learning. Moreover, Alizadeh et al. (2016) evaluated the concept of online studio diary for first-year students, which eventually enhanced the quality of student learning tasks outside the classroom.

In addition to highlighting experiential learning, some academicians have stressed the importance of community engagement in courses as a service learning tool that integrates practice in the planning curriculum and supports broader university community partnerships (Savan, 2004; Sletto, 2010). Lowe (2008) assessed the university–community partnership between Jackson State University and its surrounding community of historically black colleges and universities. The study noted the importance of diversified faculty members in better perceiving the partnership. Buys and Bursnall (2007) also explored the experience of community partnerships by seven academics from a metropolitan university in Australia. Researchers found that this community partnership enhanced the research skills and quality of teaching curriculum, which
promoted the university research and teaching-learning process. The concept of ‘communities of practice’ is also well recognized in the UK, which has been presented in work by Hart and Wolf (2006). One significant finding depicts how this partnership provides improved access to university resources and workspace for the community practitioners, eventually enhancing research collaboration opportunities. Taking into account the importance of community engagement, Ashley and Vos (2015) have suggested integrating community partnership models into the core planning curriculum. Likewise, Bromley (2006) proposed several means of incorporating local outreach into planning education and research in the form of studying pertinent community problems, documenting local resource and monitoring changes, and planning studios in partnership with community groups. Apart from these, Frank and Sieh (2016) have evaluated the prospects of student–community engagement as a diversified pedagogical approach in planning schools in the UK. This served a dual function of teaching and community revitalization through student-community engagement activities.

**Integrating Diversity into Planning Curriculum**

Planning education and practice in the U.S. is gradually embracing the concept of diversity and equity in planning curriculum over the past 20 years, which encompasses myriad dimensions of students’ identity including race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, age, marital status, cognitive style, education and physical disability (Thomas, 1996; Sandercock, 2004; Sen, 1999, 2005, Sen et al., 2016; Higbee et al., 2008; Sweet & Etienne, 2011). Planning educators believe that this gradual acceptance of diversity and equity is essential to prepare students for a multicultural work environment. This integration has gained more recognition after the PAB standards required the incorporation of such issues into planning program curriculum (Sen et al., 2014).

Research by Sen (2005) describes three distinct approaches that have been adopted by U.S. planning schools to embrace the concept of diversity in planning education: 1) Introducing a specialized course on diversity, 2) Having one or more specialized courses on diversity while integrating the issues throughout the curriculum, and 3) No specialized course but instead integrating diversity throughout the curriculum. With a view to evaluate the degree and extent of incorporating diversity into planning education, Sen (1999) has also examined the curricula of 15 graduate planning programs in the U.S. Drawing from course outlines, 41 courses were found in which the issue of race, ethnicity, gender, and class were major content. Also, reflecting the importance of diversity and inequality in the planning education and practice, Forsyth (1995) has urged faculty to introduce specialized courses on diversity into the curriculum rather than just reciting mantras about the issues of diversity throughout the course content.

There are several challenges faced by planning faculty to reform the program curriculum to incorporate issues of diversity (Forsyth, 1995; Thomas, 1996). First, shortage of minority faculty in U.S. planning programs is a limitation to offering specialized courses on diversity (Sen, 2005), as scholars argue that a diversified pool of planning educators can be sophisticated, and imaginative in teaching the topic of diversity and inequality, and recruiting students of different backgrounds (Forsyth, 1995; Sweet & Etienne, 2011, Lung-Amam et al., 2015). González and Irazábal (2015) have also recognized the need for more diversified
faculty to provide an academic and social environment for students that will nurture the
development of cultural competence in planning education. Second, with regard to inte-
grating diversity into curriculum, Thomas (1996) criticized the fragmented approach to
courses followed by the planning academe to deal with the concepts of race, equity
planning, feminism, and international social movements. The inclusion of diversity should
not be limited in changing course content and curriculum; instead it should also involve
variation in teaching processes that will connect diversity with effective social action. Third,
key complexities of incorporating multiculturalism and cultural competency into planning
curriculum are analogous to that of integrating diversity into planning education.

Limitations to Bridging the Education and Practice Gap around Issues of
Diversity

There is a need to plan for and with diverse communities, which requires a generation
of practitioners trained to approach professional practice with awareness, knowledge,
and skills that will facilitate cultural competence. Although researchers acknowledge
that this is best achieved through an integrated approach of planning education and
practice (Sweet & Etienne, 2011) there are a number of barriers to reaching these goals
in urban planning programs.

Several researchers have noted that the studio course offers an effective pedagogy to
merge planning practice with the planning education (Németh & Long, 2012;
Mandarano & Meenar, 2015). Despite the significance of studio model in enhancing
students’ capability to solve real-world planning problem, the studio courses play a
relatively small role in the planning curricula. Owing to the time-intensive nature of the
studio courses, most of the planning programs in the U.S. require only one studio
course for the graduate students in the regular course contents (Long, 2012; Hoey et al.,
2016). This small requisition of the studio model confines the scope of realistic
application of planning theory for the students.

Similarly, the university–community partnership model may be incorporated into
studios and supports student–community engagement activity and improving their
research skill opportunities. However, this community partnership is seldom integrated
into the core planning curriculum (Ashley & Vos, 2015; Frank & Sieh, 2016). Furthermore,
the university–community model can frequently face limitations as a
heterogeneous faculty is able to better grasp the university–community partnership
(Lowe, 2008). A lack of diversified faculty has resulted in the inability of the researchers
to act as a buffer in the formation of university–community collaboration (Cherry &
Shefner, 2004). This has limited the success of such community-based research projects
in the urban planning programs.

This paper intends to illustrate students’ perception regarding incorporation of
diversity and practice into planning curricula. Though planning researchers have
expressed their concern about an integrated approach of planning education, student’s
perspectives give considerable credence to the importance of bridging the tension
between planning education and practice.
Study Context and Methods

In 2015, POCIG initiated a study to understand student climate and perceptions of diversity in urban planning programs. Unique to this study, we focus on all students, including undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral students. While previous surveys have focused on doctoral students as related to the recruitment of underrepresented faculty, we acknowledge that the academic pipeline can begin in different stages of higher education. Additionally, students who enter the planning workforce will benefit from more welcoming campus climates that embrace diversity initiatives and programs.

Our research approach contributes to existing literature because we examine diversity beyond race and ethnicity. The intersections of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, citizenship status, familial status, and other factors are important nuances when developing inclusive programs. As cities and suburbs are increasingly multidimensional and multicultural, our study provides implications on how to address complicated, difficult, and necessary circumstances of these resulting population trends within planning education and practice.

We use multiple methods to provide detailed information on student experiences using a survey and in-depth interviews. First, we conducted an online survey targeting current degree-seeking students in programs listed in the 2014 ACSP Guide to Planning Schools. Respondents were asked to answer questions about their overall satisfaction with their academic department, interactions with students and faculty within and outside of the classroom, and about their perspectives on how exposure to diversity influenced their outlook on post-degree practice. The survey collected demographic information and posed open-ended questions asking students to define diversity in their own words, describe their motivation for pursuing urban planning education, and explain their sense for whether diversity played a role within their decision to pursue a planning degree.

We recruited survey participants via an invitation email sent to the 165 department heads and program directors listed in the ACSP Guide to Planning Schools (105 institutions located in the U.S. and Canada). The email solicitation contained a description of survey questions, and suggested text (including a survey link) to send via email to students who were eligible for the study. A follow-up email was sent to department heads from the ACSP President’s office, encouraging their department to participate in the research.

Surveys were completed between May 2 and 20 May 2016. Elective follow-up interviews were conducted between July and October 2016. Likert scale rating responses were broken out by race and ethnicity and were analyzed using one-way ANOVA on ranks, commonly known as Kruskal–Wallis tests (Kruskal and Wallis 1952). Kruskal–Wallis tests determine whether statistically significant differences exist between a response distribution based upon identity characteristics.

Second, we offered all survey respondents the opportunity to participate in a one-on-one follow-up interview conducted either in person or via a videoconference hosted via zoom.us. The survey asked an elective question regarding whether the participant would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. Respondents who indicated that they were interested in being interviewed participated in a follow-up interview and were then contacted directly by researchers via email to schedule a follow-up interview. Additionally, we also utilized snowball and convenient sampling.
In interviews, students were asked about their motivation for pursuing urban planning education, their experiences with planning education, and were asked to provide suggestions improving future awareness and action around diversity and climate within urban planning degree programs. Each interview lasted between 20 and 45 min. Interview audio was transcribed in its entirety for analysis. We used an inductive coding strategy, which was an iterative process that included reading interviews, developing a list of proposed themes, and then coding transcripts for content. Codes were validated by multiple readers on the research team.

Findings

We next turn toward describing student preparation for planning practice. We draw upon survey data to provide a general understanding of students’ perspectives and then turn to evidence from our in-depth interviews to add more nuances to these responses. Following our description of survey and interview data, we provide some discussion regarding the implications for planning education and practice.

Sample Description

A total of 451 complete survey responses were collected, and an additional 27 in-depth qualitative interviews were conducted. Though it is difficult to generate a response rate given our study design, the 2014 ACSP Guide to Planning Schools enumerates 5,044 Master’s-level planning students, and 914 Ph.D.-level planning students (undergraduate student numbers and demographics are not consistently reported). Table 1 presents selected general descriptive statistics of survey respondent demographics. The majority of survey respondents were enrolled full-time in Master’s-level graduate programs in urban planning. Because we interviewed students in the spring, the vast majority of students had at least one semester of experience in their degree program.

Table 2 provides a summary of demographic composition – race and ethnicity, nativity, and gender identity. With regards to the main focus of this paper – race and ethnicity – 59 percent of our sample considered themselves to be non-Hispanic white. 11% identified as Asian, 10.5% identified as African American, and 16% identified as Latino. A large number of respondents – 36% – chose not to provide a racial or ethnic identity, which is a limitation to our study. These respondents are excluded from our analysis of survey responses by race in this paper. With regard to nativity, 49% of our sample identified as being native born in the United States. Again, a large proportion of our sample chose not to provide information regarding their nativity. 40% of our sample identified as female, 29% identified as male, 3% identified as gender queer or gender nonconforming, and 26% of respondents chose not to share their gender identity.

The team recruited 27 individuals to participate in in-depth follow-up interviews. Interviewees represented a total of 13 institutions in eight states including Massachusetts, California, Florida, Illinois, Iowa, New York, Pennsylvania, and Utah. There were six participants from the Northeast, six from the Midwest, four from the South, and 10 from the West. There were 19 females and 8 males. A total of 10 participants identified as non-Hispanic white, five were Asian, eight were Black (including a Latina), and four other Latinos. There is a limitation to those who responded to interviews, as they may be biased.
Students that participated in interviews, were inherently interested in issues of diversity, therefore our findings may be less generalizable. However, this limitation does not affect the importance of the issues and challenges identified in urban planning programs and add nuance to understanding and reconciling gaps in education and the practice of planning.
Survey Results: Non-White versus White Student Perceptions about Planning Practice

Our survey instrument asked about the value of diversity within the classroom environment and within practice. Students were also asked to reflect upon the role which faculty played in framing diversity as part of planning practice. We disaggregated results based upon whether students identified as non-Hispanic white or from another racial or ethnic group (Table 3). For each response, we determined whether the distribution of responses had statistically significant differences between non-Hispanic white students and students from other racial or ethnic groups.

We found evidence that responses differed around reflexivity within class projects and assignments (Q 14.3), department support for interaction with diverse groups of practitioners (Q 14.8), opportunities to incorporate planning practice in class projects (Q 14.10), and in instructors’ ability to address issues of diversity in course-based work (Q 16.8). We did not see statistically significant differences in responses for questions about opportunities to interact with diverse community stakeholders (Q14.7), where student responses were mixed with regard to whether their departments provided such opportunities. We also did not see significant differences regarding the value of talking about diversity as a means of engaging with diverse communities in practice (Q16.4).

Table 3. Survey responses by race/ethnicity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race / Ethnicity</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>(x^2)</th>
<th>(p)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>49.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>25.7%</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>41.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>(x^2)</td>
<td>(p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>51.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>30.5%</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>(x^2)</td>
<td>(p)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>52.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>48.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: *** \(p < .01\); ** \(p < .05\); * \(p < .1\).
Students overwhelmingly indicated that talking about diversity was beneficial.

We identified statistically significant differences in responses between non-Hispanic white students and other students for the following questions:

- **I am able to examine my own background through class projects and assignments**: Regardless of race or ethnicity, the majority of students agreed that they were able to examine their own backgrounds through class projects and assignments. Yet, Non-Hispanic white students were more likely to agree or strongly agree relative to students from other backgrounds.

- **The department provides me with opportunities to interact with diverse groups of practitioners**: 71% of non-Hispanic white students agreed or strongly agreed that they had opportunities to interact with diverse groups of practitioners, compared to 54.6% of students from other racial or ethnic groups.

- **The department provides me with opportunities to incorporate planning practice into class-based work**: The majority of students felt that the department did provide opportunities to incorporate practice into class-based work; however non-Hispanic white students were more likely to agree with this statement.

- **The instructors in my department do a good job of addressing issues of diversity that exist in the communities surrounding my university**: 85% of non-Hispanic white students agreed or strongly agreed that faculty did a good job of addressing issues of diversity in surrounding communities compared to 71% of students from other backgrounds.

We also asked students to respond to an open-ended question regarding whether they thought their degree program was preparing them to work in diverse communities or with diverse populations. Responses were categorized based upon whether the overall sentiment was that programs did prepare for work in diverse communities, did not prepare for work in diverse communities, or whether they fell into a neutral or other category (Table 4). The majority of students felt that they were being prepared to work within diverse communities, although a greater proportion of non-Hispanic white students agreed with the statement.

For those students who believed that they were being prepared to work in diverse communities, having exposure to diverse perspectives across the planning curriculum was important. Many respondents observed that students would avoid such exposure based on course selection. For instance, a non-Hispanic white student relates:

*I think that is in part because I have chosen to pursue classes and activities that align with those goals. Courses in collaborative planning, theory that focuses on race and difference, etc., allow for good discussions and perspectives to be shared – however, it would likely be just as easy to avoid these topics almost entirely if one were not actively interested.*

### Table 4. Preparation for work in diverse communities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Identity</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>92 (61.7%)</td>
<td>26 (17.4%)</td>
<td>31 (20.8%)</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>69 (54.3%)</td>
<td>37 (29.1%)</td>
<td>21 (16.5%)</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>161</strong></td>
<td><strong>63</strong></td>
<td><strong>52</strong></td>
<td><strong>276</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Similarly, a student of color shares their perception that preparation for working in diverse communities is directly related to representation within the classroom among students and faculty: 'I think the other students of color in my program prepare me to work in diverse communities. Despite the program’s claims to value diversity and working with diverse communities this is not what we learn in the classroom or in program activities.' Many students felt that representation of diverse perspectives was the responsibility of all faculties. Instead, certain faculties were held responsible for teaching specialized training related to diversity. A Ph.D. student of color relates their experience as a student and an instructor:

*The courses that deal with race, ethnicity, and diversity have been taught by me [...] when I was given them to teach I was told, ‘It’s great that you are here to teach these courses, [because] if they aren’t taught every 3–5 years they will be dropped by the university from the curriculum.’ This is a problem, [because] as a doctoral student I should not be the only one in the department qualified to teach courses on race and ethnicity. If we are asking schools to show they are incorporating diversity into their curriculum for accreditation, but they are only offering them frequently enough so that they remain on the curriculum then this is disingenuous.*

Even among students who felt that diversity was reflected within their preparation, they noted limitations in how the value of diversity was being translated into practice. A non-Hispanic white student stated:

*I believe our program is great at identifying that issues surrounding race and planning exist, but terrible at providing us practical skills in breaking down barriers caused by race; at learning to have an audience-sensitive dialogue; and at discussing challenges planning practitioners have had and how those practitioners overcame those challenges (or did not). Such real-world discussion of how to deal with issues of race as a planner would be helpful beyond just knowing how to identify histories of racial tension.*

These types of responses prompted us to delve deeper into questions regarding the value of diversity and preparation for planning practice in interviews, the findings of which we present next.

**Interview Findings: Student Perspectives on Preparation for Planning Practice**

**Different Perspectives on Diversity**

In interviews, students were asked about their own personal definitions of diversity, which underscore the importance of this work and our expansion of considering broader notions of what diversity is and what it means to students. While our questions emphasis a wide range of diversity, students not only offer more narrow conceptions of diversity, but also acknowledge the growing need and value to expand those definitions. There were a range of perspectives from more of a focus on race, ethnicity, and culture to including the variations found by invisible diversity markers. More importantly, difference more generally is one lens in which students view diversity. A student explained this perspective;

*Diversity to me would be a variety of different kind of people in a particular setting. So if I’m sitting in class and, you know, I’m different, and that person next to me is different, and that person is different, everyone is different in some way, you know? Whether it’s color, race, ethnicity, you know. Yeah. Religion.*
Another student noted that diversity is also about who has access to the decision-making process and whether they have the ability to also have the space to share their unique norms and customs:

Oh man, diversity. When – I believe it’s when people, I guess, from different backgrounds – not just have an equal opportunity to come to the table but also have tables of their own and they come together to work together.

Another student echoed a similar perspective of diversity as difference:

My definition of diversity is to different people of different backgrounds. And I guess it also, I guess, would include within groups. So I guess people within the group, like not just the whole, you know, white or black thing. But more like, if a person is black, are they African-American? Are they Haitian? Are they Bahamian? What’s their, you know, nationality? I guess that’s more important than – or I guess specific for diversity than just saying, you know, white, black, or the five different – like Asians, for example. In fact with Asians it’s very different between Chinese and Japanese and South Korean.

While difference more generally and the ability to access who has the power to make decisions are acknowledged, a student also pointed out that less obvious descriptors of diversity are equally as important. A student expressed this perspective in our interview about invisible diversity:

So one thing that I’ve learned and I always have to remind myself is diversity is not always what meets the eye. You can look around at a room and think, oh, there’s no diversity here, but these people could be representatives or advocates for whatever reason. It could be work, it could be that they grew up this way. You know, it could be that they have a certain type of difference that is not visible to the eye. But I guess if I’m just thinking about diversity on just a quick note, I want to see people who seem different than me, but that’s always the case in reality. But I want to see people that represent multiple causes, multiple groups of people. And particularly, when I think about diversity, especially as an African American, I think about those minority voices and minorities in people of color, ethnicities.

Another student also suggested that differences in types of planning or ideologies are also representative of ways to think about diversity beyond physical markers:

But my understanding of it was more so like different types of planning. Maybe someone’s dealing with environmental issues. Someone else is dealing with high-rise developments or health or something like that [...]. I think this goes back to faculty being open to allowing students to present their own issues without hindrance.

In these discussions, whether about more traditional form of diversity that tends to focus on race, ethnicity, and gender, several students in interviews acknowledged the value of diversity. Many students understood the importance of diversity in the context of becoming professional planners and suggest instead of considering diversity as a crux, that it should be used to promote inclusion. One student noted:

There’s a couple of different components to it. One is what an institution can do and the other thing is what students can do as well. I think it’s important for students as well to include themselves in different functions or departments and not exclude themselves. I’ve heard over and over, especially with black students that come into PWIs, black and Latino students. They come into PWIs. They single themselves and think “I’m the only one in this class or I’m the only one in this program.” But I think that’s the beauty of it, beauty of the underrepresented person. You might be the only one. That means you have a different
perspective that can be added to those programs in a different way to shape it, going for it. So I think understanding the beauty of diversity and be able to see programs to be more inclusive. And I think students have a role in doing that themselves, as well as faculty to be open and to allow that to occur.

These interviews revealed that students share many different definitions of diversity, which are not necessarily as broad as the conception of diversity used in this study, but despite these variations, students also recognize and see the value of diversity in both the classroom, as well as faculty representation. It is particularly important for there to be an openness to difference as students continue to grapple with its meanings and more importantly how to incorporate ideas about diversity into their future professional practice endeavors as this continues to be a challenging area to reconcile in planning education.

**Narrow Perspectives on Urban Planning**

Given that one of the motivations for fostering a healthy and supportive climate for diversity within our programs is to embed this framework in students’ own schemas for planning practice, asking questions about preparation for practice is valuable. Students were asked questions about the degree to which they are trained to work with diverse communities. Students expressed that they are being trained to become planners. However, they also describes how incorporated perspectives were still narrow and rely on opinions of planners as ‘saviors’ to make decisions for the communities being planned for, rather than seeking out local knowledge for existing residents. A student described this dynamic:

*Community engagement is different when you understand the community as opposed to this is, you know, I’m the planner. I don’t know your communities, so you’re going to do it my way because I don’t really know your way. So that’s important why planning programs should teach about diversity, and teach it from the perspective of being a professional planner.*

Students of color also acknowledge that these narrow perspectives are also based on having a significant disconnect between the growing diversity of U.S. cities and the race and ethnicity of urban planners serving communities:

*When you look at the field of planning, and looking at the people who go into the field of planning. There are not really that many people of color. And it’s really disturbing because it’s not really representative of our cities. You know? So, I think for the most part, when you’re working for a city I feel like your body of officials should really do better to represent the people that are living there.*

In addition to broadening perspectives and planning programs offering more opportunities to engage directly with communities, students also expressed the importance of those efforts being inclusive of the communities being served:

*I think that the schools that we associate with as cutting edge and ahead of the curve are the ones that value people’s experiences [...] When we hear about these cities that are safe havens, it’s not like they’re safe havens. They’re where I feel good being the person I am. I don’t need somebody else to create that safe haven for me. If we’re trying to make every city the best place ever, then you want to make sure that we’re thinking about everybody. You could do all the community outreach that you want, you could have guidelines in place for*
public meetings, but at the end of the day, if you have somebody at the table that has been through these experiences, that is going to reshape the process more.

It is necessary to move beyond the normative perspectives of planning for communities, rather than with communities, engaging with ways to broaden the context of diversity and the value that community stakeholders bring to the table is essential. Students suggest that increasing opportunities outside of studio or workshop classes to practice engagement would be useful to learn how to engage with communities of ‘otherness’ in advance of being thrown into real-world planning projects. An interviewee discussed the need to learn about specific communities prior to engaging with them:

*If you were going to talk about planning in a Latino community, what might be some of the issues that might come up with a planner going into that community and starting to work in that community. And maybe present some kind of scenario, some type of problem that the students have to kind of workshop together [...] and to kind of build relationships of trust so that they can start to work in a community in positive ways. Just [...] having to put themselves in that role before they actually go out into the planning world of, “How do I engage with a community as a planner?”*

Another student expressed similar concern about courses painting a broad brush around advocacy planning, but lack specific preparation to work in diverse communities:

*I mean, I think that there are some classes in the department that really touch on planning and, like, advocacy planning [...] classes touched on how, as a planner, you really have to understand the community, almost become a part of a community before you can really start to pinpoint the best kind of solutions or ways to move forward with groups of people to really meet their needs. So I feel like in a kind of roundabout way, like, that starts to get diversity in the program, because it’s recognizing that not all communities are the same, and that there are different issues and different perspectives that different communities have to live with and kind of confront in their daily lives, and there’s not really a kind of cookie cutter way to address issues in every community [...] I think our program did a pretty good job about talking about that, but it was kind of lacking in getting of examples of what advocacy planning in communities looks like.*

Overall, students seem to be exposed to several important concepts and attitudes through coursework that planners need to engage with diverse communities. One is recognizing that residents are experts of their own communities and those planners with all their technical expertise should recognize community knowledge to create plans with key community stakeholders to address the needs of diverse communities. However, it seems that students simultaneously believe that planning as a whole is not about engaging with communities in this way, but about placating communities. In other words, they see interacting with communities as more an aspirational goal of planning and not a reality because advocacy planning and social justice concepts seem to be discussed in a more theoretical manner. As opposed to discussing the importance of diversity in broad strokes, students would like more training about how to engage with diverse communities and put into practice tools that allow them to be more effective planners. Some suggested receiving cultural competency training before immersing themselves in a community space, using case studies and planning scenarios to discuss potential issues as well as integrating hands-on techniques for inclusive collaboration.
Exposure to Planners of Color

Students also expressed a need to have more exposure to planners of color involved in planning projects as they will lend valuable perspectives when working with diverse communities. Student exposure to practitioners from different backgrounds who are reflective of the communities they serve can lend credibility to ongoing planning efforts, as opposed to raising questions about their commitment and role orientation. A non-Hispanic white student expressed concerns of singular perspectives offered by planners:

*I think one of the funniest moments was we had this recent panel on Flint, Michigan. And it was four middle-aged white males talking about, the experiences of people in Flint, Michigan which, I thought was really funny. Afterwards, I had the opportunity to talk to a couple of the people on the panel. And one of the professors asked me what I thought about it. And I was like, well, you know, it’s great. But like, once again, thank you for bringing four white males to tell us about, how we’re oppressing minorities. Like, that’s really helpful guys.*

While this is only one example, many students mentioned a lack of diversity in interactions with planning professionals across different disciplines in planning. Having practitioners that are representative of the communities they serve offer relevant insight, as well as facilitate providing perspectives that a broader constituency can relate to and connect with.

Training to Engage with Diverse Publics in the Planning Profession

Unclear Role as Students Working in Diverse Communities

Students discussed in interviews the barriers to building competencies working with diverse communities and concerns about the role students play in community-engaged planning projects. The typical planning studio course, may work in communities that are unfamiliar to students and requires building cultural competence to be effective in any engagement based work. A non-Hispanic white student notes the challenges of grappling with questions about their role and how they fit into these spaces they are planning for, but are not part of:

*I think that also ties into the kind of assumptions that when we write a plan for the west side of Chicago, there’s kind of this assumption that none of us in the room are from that neighborhood. And even for our plan making studio last semester we were writing a plan for the west side of Chicago […] But even when we were discussing communicative planning and going out and doing public outreach there was always this implicit assumption that everyone in the room – like, everyone in the program who is part of this class was not also a community member. Like, those things never intersect or overlap.*

When asked about opportunities to promote cross-cultural dynamics outside of the classroom, an African American student discussed the difficulty of being the only minority when the predominantly white student organization worked in minority communities:

*I would just say, you know, the kids are all of African American and Hispanic descent. Everybody else is white (students). So of course they would have, you know, preferred to see someone a little bit, you know – someone that they could, you know, particularly relate to. But I felt like even me being there would kind of be a little bit awkward, I guess. I don’t know. Kind of weird […] I mean, for example, they’ll say, “Well, black people can actually do*
this?" Or they think that, you know, can black people do this career? You know, I would like to show them that, but you know.

Likewise, a Latino student also acknowledged the benefits of having more diversity in the student body, particularly when classes are engaged in minority communities:

I would start with saying that when you have an understanding of a particular community that is not necessarily of the majority or the mainstream, you then have a perspective and a connection with the community that others don’t … It’s not a guarantee, but you can have factors of trust that improve your relationship and communication with that community. You can understand unspoken assumptions and ways of even thinking and doing things, how you reach out to a community.

Increased exposure to diversity in the curriculum, will offer a greater competency for students that are trained to engage with diverse communities. In preparing students to engage with communities of ‘otherness’ students also express frustration with working in diverse communities where there are few connections to the communities where they are working, as students are outsiders. This disconnect presents a complicated and oftentimes uncomfortable dynamic for students, which can be reconciled by taking steps to include a broader range of diverse students that may have similar cultural backgrounds and values of the communities being served.

**Lack of Openness in the Workplace to Diversity**

In addition to training students on how to engage with diverse communities, fostering greater inclusion and openness in the workplace is also a meaningful way to provide spaces where those from communities of ‘otherness’ are not excluded or marginalized. Greater inclusion and making space for different backgrounds to incorporate their perspectives and lived experiences is essential. An LGBT student expressed their frustrations at being marginalized in the workplace:

So as like a practitioner [...] people tell me that I’m unprofessional talking about my dating life. Okay, got it. I won’t tell you about it. Perfect. People tell me that they don’t want to see my rainbow pin. Okay, got it. Put it away [...] You don’t want to know of my personal life? Okay, fine. I think like is it fair? It’s not fair because straight people get to do it all the time, but whatever. So I think like as a planner it’s going to be very much like, how do I present myself? How do I want to interact while also being a member of the community? How can I like represent my community without giving people like a bad idea of the community as well?

An African American student shared similar concerns about the fear of not being accepted in the workplace when asked why they were nervous about entering the field of professional planning. They said:

Am I going to be treated the same way? Or like it’s a predominantly white field, so I’m thinking, like, am I going to be marginalized? I just don’t want to be discriminated against, because I have to work. I have to get a job or something, and I don’t want someone to just say, “Okay. Well, you know, we’re not going to hire you because you’re this and you’re that.

These student’s concerns point to a larger challenge which most new planners must mediate – how to balance elements of personal identity and representation with those associated with undertaking a professional role and serving community needs. For
students who claim multiple communities as part of their identity, this becomes more challenging. These student experiences suggest that the planning profession still needs to move past tolerance to understanding and acceptance of people from all backgrounds. Moreover, making space for people with different identities to incorporate and bring their lived experiences to the table is valuable for planning practice.

*Lack of Diverse Faculty Representation in Urban Planning Programs*

**Benefits of Diversity**

Students were asked about examples that their departments have used to positively integrate issues of diversity into the classroom, curriculum, or overall environment. An area mentioned by several students were the intangible and tangible benefits of faculty using the classroom as a way to promote diversity. In some cases, faculty brought in guest speakers from underrepresented groups, where students perceived it was not intentional, but more so related to the knowledge or skill set of the practitioner. While the rationales may not have been explicitly communicated by faculty, other minority and female students expressed how crucial it was for them to see planners of color and women sharing their work experiences on classroom panels. An African American student discussed a professional topics class where each week a practitioner came to speak with students:

*The different people brought in were diverse. I appreciated that a lot. So we had two people that, I thought were notable. They work for the Department of Transportation at pretty prestigious positions [...] So I was really impressed to see that how, you know, a man of color was in that position. And also, there was another guy that he recently graduated [...] he had another prestigious position as well. And he had dreads, you know. But he was very clean-cut. You could tell he was very professional [...] And through hard work, he said he was able to [...] push through the ranks in the Department of Transportation and get the position where he’s at right now."

This student also highlighted a transportation course that also offered a different perspective on traditional transportation professionals:

*Although she wasn’t a planner, she was a woman and she was in engineering. And I was very impressed with her as well [...] So to see her as a woman in the field and very prominent – she builds bridges – was very impressive as well. So I thought – I was very happy he brought her in – you know, because different females in the class, because, as women in that planning class, I think we did understand that it was kind of a man’s world already in transportation."

Another African American student also discussed the benefits of having more diverse faculty that will help to shape curriculum that can bridge the gap between planning as a technical discipline, yet also a field that should acknowledge and respond to growing inequalities:

*I think trying to bring more faculties into it dealing with inequality issues that kind of can bridge that gap between issues of development purposes in planning, which is kind of almost the norm but also how can development help stem inequality issues. So trying to bring in more faculties and trying to shape the curriculum and make sure some of those components are included in the classroom instruction along with the technical aspects, too. I think students want to learn how to do things, but there’s also a need to know how to do things*
in a certain way. So how to do things that do not harm anyone else that helps entire cities more than they harm cities.

Students not only expressed a desire to increase diverse faculty in planning departments, but also acknowledged faculty may reflect the primary demographic where the institution is located:

I feel like a lot of that is definitely a reflection of like, where I live because, you know, I went to high school locally as well. And there was me and one African American student in my graduating class of like, 400. So it’s not a diverse area. So, the college is definitely a reflection of that, but on the other hand the college also brings in way more diversity to this area than really exists here normally. So, I feel like it would be great to see a little bit more of a reflection of that in the professors.

Whether intentional or not, these opportunities to engage with professionals from underrepresented groups create counter-narratives of ‘who’ and ‘what’ planners do. In these cases, a female and a black male transportation planners were perceived as a role model, which are far less represented in the planning profession. These interactions provide examples and role models for minority and female students concerning what is possible for them to achieve professionally. Likewise, having more diverse faculty offers opportunities for students of color to receive mentorship and see representation of those with similar identities that reflect the growing diversity not only of urban planning programs but the U.S. more generally.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

We observed several important trends related to diversity and practice, which include: (1) narrow perspectives on urban planning with limited exposure to planners of color, (2) limitations in training students to efficiently engage in diverse communities, (3) lack of openness in the workplace, and (4) benefits of diverse representation among students and faculty. Students that discussed the lack of varied perspectives offered in curriculum dedicated to diversity also mentioned that courses do not adequately prepare them to work with specific subgroups (e.g. Latino, African American). Students who note the gap in education and planning practice also acknowledge the difficulty in determining their own positionality in terms of identity when working in communities of ‘otherness.’ Additionally, students described the benefits of a more diverse faculty and interaction and exposure to planners of color. These efforts underscore the importance of diverse representation not only in the academy, but also in the workplace to promote greater acceptance and inclusion of difference.

Overall, planning students expressed a concern that the values that faculty espouse in the classroom around advocacy, equity, and social justice do not always translate into connecting these values to planning practice in diverse communities. Students identified three key challenges facing planning programs in bridging the gap between education and practice: (1) Moving away from the normative role of planning practice, (2) Using various methods to train planners to engage with diverse publics and, (3) Exposing students to underrepresented groups as role models. Past discussions around planning curriculum and education have highlighted these gaps (Baum, 1997), and our findings underscore the continued challenges associated with training students to
catalyze classroom knowledge into the basis for long and fulfilling careers. One immediate step to bridge this gap is to build better connections between planning programs and the range of communities, which constitute our local contexts. Providing students (regardless of their concentration or desired area of planning practice) with greater opportunities to come in contact with underrepresented stakeholders and communities, and practitioners from underrepresented backgrounds enrich students’ visions and models for practicing the art of planning.

The findings from this study also suggest that planning curriculum needs to be reformed to more effectively address diversity and social equity (Friedmann, 1996; Sen, 2005). Planning educators from diverse backgrounds are believed to better instruct students about issues of gender inequality and cultural complexity in the planning field (Sen, 2005). Hence, underrepresentation of minority faculty is considered as a limitation to introduce specialized courses on diversity and multiculturalism (Forsyth, 1995; Lung-Amam et al., 2015; Sweet & Etienne, 2011). This limited representation of minority faculty not only affects the recruitment of students from different cultural backgrounds but also reduces the active involvement of students in the discourse of the multiple dimension of diversity, such as gender, race, and ethnicity (González & Irazábal, 2015).

Systematic reform of planning education necessitates the active recruitment and retention of a diverse faculty and student body to facilitate the integration of diversity into the core planning curriculum (Lung-Amam et al., 2015). This increased recruitment can foster greater education and planning practice on diversity by adopting useful pedagogical approaches (e.g. critical thinking, classroom discussion, student journals) other than the traditional methods of teaching (Thomas, 1996). Furthermore, the increased enrollment of female and minority students will facilitate classroom debate on issues of gender and diversity, and enrich the discourse in planning (Looye & Sesay, 1998).

In order to acknowledge the needs of a growing diverse student body, their racial and cultural variation should be reflected through research and education in the curriculum content, pedagogy and practice (Agyeman, 2003). In this regard, Agyeman and Erickson (2012) have opted for a cross-curricular approach with cultural competency that will enrich the planning curriculum. Also, in order to develop more culturally inclusive practices, a community based participatory approach can be useful to enable teachers and students to gain on the ground experience, as well as foster culture-specific knowledge, behaviors, attitudes and skills among practitioners (Agyeman, 2003; Nguyen et al., 2006). Prioritizing the practice of diversity within our departments, and innovating around how we teach and model this practice for our students helps to cement the relevance of planning for future generations of planning students, faculty, and the communities we seek to serve.

Notes

1. This research was conducted by a team consisting of members of ACSP POCIG and was generously funded by ACSP.
2. Participants could select more than one racial or ethnic identity category.
3. We chose not to perform statistical tests on the distribution of these coded open-ended responses.
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