

Graduate and Professional Student Senate
2004-2005 Departmental Reviews: Interdisciplinary Urban Design and Planning
31 January 2005
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INTRODUCTION

On Monday, January 31, 2005, a representative of the Graduate and Professional Student Senate (GPSS) met with several students from the Interdisciplinary Urban Design and Planning (IUDP) PhD program. The purpose of this meeting was to collect the opinions of the graduate students currently in the IUDP PhD program, which is currently undergoing a regular review by the University of Washington Graduate School. The aim of this report is to summarize the students' views regarding their program. This report will be presented to the Graduate School Council, which is overseeing the IUDP review.

DEPARTMENTAL STRENGTHS

The students who participated in the January 31 meeting praised many aspects of the PhD program.

Several students noted that since they started their studies, the program has taken positive steps towards clarifying the programs requirements. While the students agreed that many improvements could still be made in this area (see below), most felt comfortable in their knowledge of what was required of them in terms of classes, exams and dissertations. They hoped that this pattern of improvement would continue so that the process will become as transparent and straightforward as possible.

The students also said that they were receiving fair degree of professional and academic training commensurate with their individual interests. Classes, research assistantships, and other aspects of the program generally offered opportunities to develop key skills. However, most agreed that the extent of a given student's professional development depended heavily on personal initiative, and is not the result of any particular strategy of the program. As the program evolves, most of the students hoped that other opportunities will develop that will allow them, and future students, to form a complete palette of skills. Areas where students hope to see improvements are in the number of teaching assistantships and design classes (see below).

Students were also happy to have a dedicated space for IUDP graduate students in Gould Hall where they are able to meet and do schoolwork, although the lack of office space for teaching assistants (TAs) is an ongoing issue.

Students also found that faculty from affiliated departments are generally accessible, which is a requisite feature of any interdisciplinary program.

DEPARTMENTAL WEAKNESSES

There are several areas where the students showed a degree of dissatisfaction with the program. Some of them relate to perennial problems faced by almost all graduate programs of all scales and sizes; others relate specifically to the IUDP PhD program.

As noted above, the students in the group noted that there have been some improvements in the clarity of degree requirements. They also complained that there are areas where students in the program are uncertain as to their options. Specifically, students in the group felt that they have been given little to determine proper course substitutions for core classes. For example, students in the IUDP PhD program are required to take three courses from a cluster of classes called "Urban Processes and Patterns," which includes a list of fifteen potential courses. However, the program has not defined the essential components of a "Urban Processes and Patterns" class, so students are sometimes at a loss when it comes

to a proper class substitution. The problem is exacerbated by the interdisciplinary nature of the program. Students are often at the mercy of other departments to offer core classes, which makes planning and executing their course of study, in a timely manner, difficult. While the option of class substitution makes it easier for students to complete their coursework in a reasonable amount of time, the process of class substitution remains somewhat unclear. Students also felt that whether or not a class substitution is approved is unclear as well; approval often amounted to a seemingly arbitrary yes or no answer. Some of the students suggested that the program clarify the essence course categories (e.g., What is the purpose of the required Urban Processes and Patterns cluster?) and the process of substitutions.

With respect to professional and academic training, most students felt that they were missing skills in two key areas:

First, students felt that there are not enough opportunities to learn and develop teaching skills. Given the paucity of TA positions available to graduate students in the IUDP program, many expressed concern that they would not have the requisite experience to become academics. Students in the program have noticed dwindling TA opportunities in the past three to four years, which parallels a university-wide trend in reduced TA opportunities.

Second, graduate students in the IUDP program have also felt that there are not enough opportunities to learn and practice the design aspect of their program. The number of drawing and design studio classes available is apparently below what is needed. Several students expressed concern that, after obtaining their doctorate, they would enter into their professional life in urban design and planning without ever having done a single drawing. Some of the students felt that competency in drawing and design is a requisite skill for their future professional lives.

As is the case with most graduate programs at the University of Washington, funding opportunities for students has become significantly constrained in recent years. Students in the group held varying opinions regarding the normal or expected amount of funding a graduate student in the IUDP program is supposed to receive, ranging from no guaranteed funding to three years for incoming students. Funding patterns apparently vary from student to student, and so the allocation of funding opportunities is not transparent. The primary mode of graduate funding is apparently RA positions. Research assistantships vary from year to year, and are totally dependent upon grants written by faculty members. Teaching assistantships are much more rare.

Students in the group have also found the level of faculty advising and availability far below what they expected, especially from members of their dissertation committee. Not unlike many other departments at the University of Washington, IUDP faculty members are stretched to the limit and thus have little time to spare for graduate advising. Some of the students felt that faculty have literally no time for graduate advising. Others expressed concern that the level of communication between them their advising faculty is virtually non-existent (e.g., often emails are not returned or meetings are interminably cancelled). While the students in the IUDP would ideally like to meet once a week with their key faculty advisor(s), more often than not, students often go long periods without any contact at all with their faculty advisors, despite concerted efforts to make contact and arrange regular meetings.

Finally, in relation to the lack of classes offered in design, graduate students in the IUDP program expressed concern that the IUDP program has drifted away from the design aspect and is now dominated by the planning and policy side of things. This problem was made worse following the creation of a graduate program on the built environment, which offers more opportunities in design than the IUDP. Some of the students felt that the IUDP program either needs to recommit itself to design or should be renamed to capture the program's emphasis on urban planning policy.

CONCLUSION

Graduate students in the IUDP share many of the same problems faced by graduate students across of the university. However, as the surveyed students reported, there are some problems that relate specifically to the program. Students in the IUDP program were quick to report that the program has put some effort into clarifying the process by which IUDP PhD students will obtain their degrees, which is apparently part of an ongoing plan to improve conditions for graduate students in the IUDP. They also felt that there was a strong sense of community among students in the program. Students in the focus group also noted a lack of competition over the limited sources of funding. In other departments inter-student competitiveness over funding tends to compromise the sorts of relationships between graduate students that make the experience personally rewarding and intellectually fulfilling. Areas for obvious improvement include:

- Clarifying the purpose of certain required course clusters and the process of course substitution;
- Offering more opportunities for students to develop teaching skills, as teaching assistants or in teaching methodology classes;
- Offering more opportunities for students interested in developing design drawing skills;
- Clarifying the funding procedures so that present and incoming students will know what to expect and will be able to better plan their finances; more transparency in funding selection will also reduce the risk of inter-student tension;
- Find ways to improve faculty-student communication, especially between students and their advisors;
- Clarify the nature of the program and possibly consider re-naming the degree if design aspect will become eclipsed by shift towards policy and planning or the new Built Environment program.

If the IUDP PhD program is able to find ways to alleviate these problems, present and future graduate students in the program will undoubtedly come away more satisfied and professionally prepared.