

Date: February 26, 2018

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Re: Department of Urban Design and Planning Review Committee Report

Strengths of the department and its degree programs

We appreciated the opportunity to review the Department of Urban Design and Planning in the College of Built Environments. The department and the university provided briefing documents, including a detailed self-study that helped us understand the context and the trajectory of the program over the last few years. The documents exhibited the department's commitment to enhancing the content and delivery of its degree programs and their curricula. The review team met with the faculty, staff, students, alumni, professional council, and leadership of the program, as well as college and the university representatives. We want to thank all participants for their contributions to the review, and especially for their candor, suggestions, and questions which helped inform our work. Based on the information we received from the documents and our two-day campus visit, we offer the following observations and recommendations.

Observations

1. *Community, Environment & Planning (CEP) undergraduate program:* Our conversation with CEP students and the program administrators convinced us that this is clearly a unique program, enthusiastically supported by students, alumni, and associated staff. Students are fully engaged in all aspects of the program, shaping its requirements, recruiting students, fostering a sense of community, and working on day-to-day governance through committees. The program fosters students' leadership abilities, and students who elect this major do so in part because of the ability to help shape their education. Small class sizes are particularly helpful for their learning outcomes and the camaraderie it produces among the students. An active alumni group is very helpful in finding or creating internships and jobs for CEP graduates.
2. *Department Faculty:* The department benefits from having an exceptional group of faculty committed to the success of its degree programs, learning outcomes and relevance to the discipline and the profession. Faculty of all ranks, including part-time and adjunct faculty, expressed a deep commitment to and passion for the department. We also observed a sense of community and collegiality among all faculty members. These assets

will help assure the department's future success. The department is home to faculty members who are nationally and internationally known for their high quality scholarship. Some are equally recognized regionally and nationally for their contributions to professional practice and engagement.

3. *Department staff:* The department has exceptionally capable staff members who support all aspects of the department and the various degree programs. They make the entire operation run successfully through their management of the department's day-to-day affairs.
4. *Cross-disciplinary partnerships:* Several faculty members of the department have developed cross-disciplinary partnerships with units across the university (including dual degree programs in public health, public policy and other areas). These efforts diversify the student and faculty cohorts, and offer opportunities to train professionals with expanded range of expertise. Interdisciplinary research offers hope for tackling difficult and persistent urban problems, and emerging issues. We applaud the department for its willingness to go beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries.
5. *International opportunities:* The department's longstanding tradition of offering opportunities to study abroad is clearly valued by students, and differentiates it from other peer programs.
6. *Professional Council:* The department's Professional Council is an extraordinary resource. Dedicated local professionals play an active role in mentoring students, providing paid internships, assisting with fundraising, helping with the professional development of students and finding jobs for graduates. While many planning programs have some form of professional advisory groups, the members of the review team have never encountered a group as active and effective in assisting in the academic mission of the department. Members of the Professional Council have a desire to continue and expand their supportive role; we heartily recommend that the faculty take up this offer.
7. *Collaboration:* We were impressed by the collaborative efforts among students, faculty, staff, and leadership in developing curriculum, planning and engaging with fundraising, as well as creating and adopting a diversity plan.
8. *Diversity Plan:* We were particularly encouraged to read the department's diversity plan, which reflects best practices for addressing diversity and equity issues, and look forward to its implementation.

Challenges and Recommendations

In our review of the department and interactions with various stakeholders, we also observed a number of challenges, for which we offer a set of recommendations.

Principal Challenges

1. The department clearly lacks adequate resources. This includes both financial and faculty resources. While the former will be partially addressed if the department is able to grow its degree programs, the latter has been made clearly obvious by the difficulty of covering all the educational commitments in the face of a decline in faculty FTEs of at least 20% over the past few years.
2. With the decline in faculty resources and the expectations that faculty will be heavily involved in program activities (including curricular, governance, recruitment, fundraising, engagement, and advocacy efforts) faculty responsibilities have increased substantially.
3. The program needs to fully activate its diversity plan, including recruitment and support for faculty and students, as well as expanding its course content on topics of diversity and inclusion. Students expressed a passionate desire for further engagement with this subject and its importance in planning praxis.
4. Based on what we learned from our visit, it is clear that students desire a combination of theory and professional skills that will help them become effective planners. They do not always find the right balance between these two in the courses offered.
5. The program needs to consider strategic areas of disciplinary growth, with an eye to those that will attract additional resources, and expand the faculty available for education and research.
6. The department needs to make a set of strategic decisions about growth that will result in program sizes that increase financial resources and allow for an expansion of the faculty.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the MUP Curriculum

The department has been educating urban planning students for more than 80 years and, therefore, has a long and successful track record. Evidence of the program's legacy is the growing number of successful alumni, many of whom remain actively involved in the department today. However, urban environments are constantly evolving, a process that requires planning programs to regularly evaluate their curriculum to ensure that it provides students with the training that they need to be successful professional planners.

In our interviews with students and through our brief review of the current curriculum, we have several observations:

- The curriculum is heavily weighted in favor of required courses – 12 of the roughly 21 courses that students take are required, 13 if the strongly recommended GIS course is included. This leaves little room for clusters of specialized courses, including courses in other programs.
- Students feel that there are too many introductory courses and too few advanced courses, and that there is substantial duplication of content in the required courses.
- The first year is largely taken up by required courses on general planning theory and methods, and students would like to move more quickly to courses in their areas of special interest, and to pursue a ladder of courses in these areas that develop specialized competence.

- This emphasis on required courses also ties faculty up in teaching generalized courses rather than courses in their specialized fields of expertise.

As we understand, the department has initiated a planning process to rework the curriculum. We offer the following suggestions as input to this process:

- *Refresh existing courses in the curriculum.* To refresh existing courses, the department should analyze all course syllabi to make sure that each syllabus includes clear learning objectives (content and skills) and that readings are updated to represent current thinking on the course topic. Moreover, it is impossible to understand and address most planning issues without addressing the intersection between the course topic and issues of race, equity, and inclusion; these subjects need to be included into each course. Finally, the department should rely on the syllabi review to identify course content that is duplicative and work with course instructors to minimize overlapping material. A good outcome might be a smaller number of required courses, freeing up faculty for teaching more advanced courses in their areas of specialty.
- *Update course scheduling.* The review of existing syllabi should allow the department to better evaluate the scheduling and sequencing of courses. Students are limited in the number of courses that they can take in any quarter or year and, therefore, scheduling decisions must trade off a number of important objectives. Many faculty members advocate that students take core courses in the first few quarters, supposedly as building blocks for more advanced study. However many students are anxious to take classes in their particular substantive area of interest early in their studies so that they acquire professional skills that will help them obtain summer jobs or internships. The department needs to balance these two objectives, and there is no reason that both options cannot be offered. Our discussions with students and alumni suggest that students would like to take at least one (if not two) GIS courses and a studio in their first year in the program.
- *Elevate level of courses.* Some students and alumni raised concerns that the introductory courses were too elementary for graduate students. These concerns may reflect the varied composition of each class – perhaps a mix of undergraduates in the minor, graduate students who come from non-planning fields, and graduate students with planning backgrounds. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for this issue. Some course instructors should increase the level of difficulty in their courses, perhaps offering supplementary readings or an open online course (MOOC) for those who arrive with little background in the field. Or, if student enrollment increases, it may be possible to offer separate sections for graduate students and undergraduate students minoring in urban planning¹
- *Waivers for experienced students.* The desire to move on to more advanced work may be met by waivers for advanced students. Students with prior background in an area might be waived out of introductory courses, allowing them to enroll in second or third tier courses.

¹We understand that this change likely would raise other problems, such as having enough offerings for students enrolled in the minor.

- *Increase curricular flexibility.* Planners often work at the intersection between multiple areas of specialization. Students would benefit from a more permeable curriculum that allows them to gain expertise in a primary area of specialization but also to take complementary courses in other areas. The faculty already seems to be moving in this direction.
- *Develop new courses.* If there is an opportunity to add new courses, our interviewees suggest a demand for the following: additional urban design courses to allow for cumulative learning, an additional studio, more training in economic analysis, courses that focus on developing students' process skills such as dispute resolution, and courses in emerging areas such as big data and smart cities.
- *Add an internship requirement.* Students and alumni highlighted the importance of internships in learning about the planning profession as well as obtaining full-time jobs once they graduated. Therefore, we would suggest instituting an internship requirement that is flexible enough to accommodate students for whom this requirement would be a hardship. This would also help foreign students who are now prohibited from working during their studies.
- *Rethink the "urban design" specialization.* Students have concluded that it is not possible to acquire the requisite skills to become an urban designer in the traditional sense – as a person who designs and renders plans for urban places – by taking the three courses and one studio currently offered. As a result, those who wish to achieve this objective typically pursue the urban design certificate which generally involves extra time and studios taken elsewhere, or a dual degree with landscape architecture. Although we did not review the courses in detail or look at work produced by students, this makes intuitive sense to us. The program will need to make decisions on the scale of its offerings, and how they are advertised. It should be possible to develop in a 3-5 course sequence an appreciation and critical understanding of the process by which sites and cities are designed, which is essential for those who will become design managers. Some of these courses also are essential for those who wish to specialize in land use planning, and could be a valuable addition to the professional education of architects and landscape architects. For those students who wish to go beyond this foundation, smoothing the pathway for urban design certificates and dual degrees is essential.
- *Reconsider thesis/terminal project requirements.* Individual theses are a time-sink for faculty and often not a useful way to hone skills before students enter practice. Few projects in the field resemble individual theses, and the time required to complete them is frequently the reason students do not graduate on time. An alternative would be to encourage group projects based on real issues in the field, with 5-8 students collaborating under the guidance of a faculty advisor. Perhaps an individual thesis might be retained as an option, but only if a student can make the case for why it is best for them, and if there is a faculty member substantively interested in working with them on it.

Recommendation 2: Faculty

- *Ensure that faculty salaries are commensurate with the salaries of faculty at similar institutions.* Faculty salaries have fallen to the bottom of the levels of peer programs, which

will threaten the retention and recruitment efforts of the department. Seattle is becoming a high-cost city; unless this situation is remedied, the program will inevitably decline.

- *Look for opportunities to provide faculty with support and recognition.* Beyond salaries, most top programs currently support a variety of professional development activities including travel, bridge funding for research efforts, and publication projects. These can help acknowledge faculty efforts as well as draw national and international attention to faculty accomplishments.
- *Associate professor mentoring and support.* We noted that the talented group of associate professors is also carrying much of the collective responsibility for outreach, studios and internal governance, leaving little time for activities that will assure their promotion to full professor. Careful mentoring will be essential to ensure that they are on track to be successful.
- *Develop faculty leadership.* The current department chair has done an excellent job of moving the department forward, but there is not an obvious pipeline of faculty who are willing to assume leadership roles in the future. This issue will need attention.
- *Importance of practitioner educators.* Given the importance of professional practice in the department, it is critical to ensure that time and energy devoted to activities in the field are valued in promotion and tenure decisions, as they are in architecture and other sister fields. The department is also blessed with dedicated and hard-charging practitioners who teach one or two much-valued courses and need recognition for their contributions. Establishing an annual award for contributions by a practitioner-educator might be a useful first step.

Recommendation 3: Student Recruitment

The department should expand its recruitment efforts to increase the number of applicants to the degree programs and to ensure a diverse pool of applicants. This will be critical to achieve its diversity objectives and in maintaining high standards while expanding the number of students in its programs (See Recommendation 7).

Support from related offices on campus and active relationships with other universities in the state and beyond are important in this effort. Increasing the relationship with the University of Washington, Tacoma was highlighted during our visit. Outreach to UW Tacoma and other universities also would be a positive step toward increasing the diversity of the student body.

Increased faculty diversity as well as a curriculum that incorporates an inclusive pedagogy that includes issues of diversity, social justice, equity planning, and other related topics can further enhance the ability of the department to attract a diverse pool of applicants and students. One place to begin may be to ensure that new adjunct faculty adds to diversity. We also ask the university to support the efforts of the department by providing the financial resources needed for recruitment and support of diverse students, faculty and staff.

Recommendation 4: Diversity Plan

We have addressed a number of issues related to this topic in previous sections. As the department moves from development to implementation of its diversity plan, we want to highlight and reemphasize a few additional points here. The student body and curricular content clearly need to be diversified further, and these are inter-related. A more diverse curriculum and faculty will help attract a more diverse student body. Incorporating race and equity content into all the core courses would be a positive development, extending beyond offering a single seminar on the subject. Other colleges on campus are pursuing plans for direct admissions into the college, both to ensure that classrooms are full and to accomplish holistic admissions policies that can lead to a diverse student body. If it hasn't already done so, the College of Built Environments should consider the merits of direct admissions.

Recommendation 5: Identify substantive growth areas

There was substantial agreement among faculty on two substantive growth areas. The rapidly expanding area of big data, smart cities and data science is one priority. The second growth area includes efforts to understand and promote healthy communities. We heartily support expansion in these areas. They are also areas where the university has a comparative advantage and where programs have already been launched.

Ideally, resources from the college or university should be found to seed work in these areas. As a small department, partnering with other colleges will be essential, such as the growing ties with the School of Public Health on community health issues. Creating links to the university-wide smart cities initiative is necessary. Current faculty also will need to consider whether they can shift or expand their research to pursue opportunities in these new substantive areas.

We also would like to highlight the regional resources that could be of potential use in the creation, support, and growth of the new strategic areas, particularly the first priority (i.e., big data, smart cities, and data science).

Recommendation 6: Increase the relationship between the department and the Seattle Region

The Seattle region has been a laboratory for innovative planning for several decades, and many of the faculty members are working on issues that will help propel it into the future. Neighborhood planning, regional preservation of agricultural lands, downtown urban growth and development, and planning for climate change and sustainability are among the areas where Seattle is seen as a model nationally and internationally. Many of the students attracted to the department say they came because of this record, and the quality of life it supports. However, the alumni report that the visibility of the department has declined in recent years and that the department does not emphasize or publicize its regional ties. This may be an antidote to the boosterism that prevailed in years past, but we suspect that the department is missing an opportunity to capitalize on its setting.

We offer several suggestions:

- *Stakeholder outreach.* The department should make more of an effort to reach out to planning and governmental organizations to publicize the work of faculty and students. This could include presenting research findings at APA chapter conferences and specially organized topical events, inviting public officials to final reviews of studios, undertaking high visibility studio projects and presenting these to influential people and organizations. The department could also create a monthly blog that is mailed to professionals and other influential stakeholders (including but extending beyond alumni), highlighting one topic that has emerged from some current work in the department.
- *Media.* The department should place articles in local newspapers on the work of the department. Faculty members might also regularly author op-eds in local outlets.
- *Content.* In their communications, the department should publicize the high quality of life and the many professional opportunities in Seattle. Planning programs in other cities have benefitted by local identification. The University of British Columbia (UBC) emphasizes its Vancouver ties; the University Pennsylvania promotes the Philadelphia experience; and New York programs refer to the New York advantage, etc. UW Tacoma consistently emphasizes its local and regional connections.
- *Local expertise.* The department should draw on experienced local professionals to teach the first-year studio, a model used by the University of Pennsylvania. This approach not only will address students' expressed desire for further exposure to professional skills, but also it will expand connections between the department and the region. The added value of this model also could manifest in the expanded role of the professional council and fundraising efforts of the department.

Recommendation 7: Continue efforts to raise funds and minimize costs (in conjunction with increased fundraising efforts by the College Advancement team)

Given the resource needs of the department, we were encouraged to learn about the efforts to expand external funding and the necessary resource management. Below we offer a few observations and suggestions.

- *Slightly increase size of the degree programs.* As with most units on campus, the department's growth potential is limited by available financial resources. Increasing the revenue generated by the department then becomes a predicate for personnel growth. As student tuition is the largest source of department revenue, it will be necessary to increase student enrollment to support personnel growth. A reasonable goal for the near future is to increase enrollments in both the undergraduate and MUP degree programs by 10 students each per year. A modest growth of the MIPM program is even more cost effective at raising new revenue than is growth of the majors and MUP programs and should be considered. A 20% growth of tuition revenue may permit the addition of a faculty member. A new faculty member could help alleviate the extra workload associated with a larger student population.

- *Expand the role of the professional council in fundraising and mentoring students.* Although gift funds are unlikely to solve the department's financial challenges, such funds are an important resource for the department, especially in the area of student support. The department's goal of raising \$1.5M in the current campaign is ambitious, yet feasible. The department has an important resource for advancement in its professional council. Members of the Professional Council are willing and eager to work with the department to raise funds. It should be a priority to fully engage the professional council in advancement planning. A successful strategy used by other departments for advancement is to host a public lecture or series of lectures given by highly prominent speakers. The online registration for the lectures provides contact information for the attendees, broadening the base of potential donors.

Recommendation 8: Update the department's strategic plan as a two-part process

Meetings with faculty conveyed a palpable sense of loss over the decline in faculty resources through the two retirements and the shift in faculty to the new real estate department. Faculty members have increased responsibilities and, therefore, are reticent to take on new projects and responsibilities without an expansion in the number of ladder faculty. But we were also struck by the energy that adjunct faculty and the professional council bring to their involvement in teaching and mentoring students, and providing internships for those who wish to combine professional experience with their academic work. The department also has made considerable progress in expanding resources for student aid and applied research projects.

We would like to suggest a way forward that aims to optimize current resources while allowing the department to move forward with its priorities. Think of it as a two-step process:

- *Step One:* The department should take a hard look at the current deployment of resources with an eye to freeing up faculty to pursue new initiatives. There are several ways this might be done; we mentioned some of these strategies previously.
 - Reducing the number of required core courses to free faculty up for more advanced teaching.
 - Recruiting younger practitioners to teach the basic studio on a voluntary basis and use other practitioner educators to teach courses and studios. In some cases, professional firms might be willing to assume responsibility for a studio.
 - Providing credit for internships and making them a requirement.
 - Increasing class sizes by combining courses
 - Moving to group projects as the norm for terminal projects.
- *Step Two:* The department should seek new resources to further advance priority areas:
 - Expand class sizes for the MUP program modestly to bring in new resources.
 - Seek out collaborators in other departments to expand work in priority areas.
 - Seek targeted searches for new ladder faculty in priority areas.

Some thoughts on recommendations to the Dean:

Reflecting on the content of our conversations and overall observations, we believe a few changes and initiatives at the college level could help the department significantly:

- *Centralize some functions.* Currently, a number of functions are fragmented and delegated to staff within each department. We ask the Dean to fully examine this practice and consider centralizing some functions (such as payroll for example) to alleviate the pressure and duplicative nature of these efforts.
- *Greater central leadership around advancement and communications.* We believe that central leadership is needed to support the department's fundraising efforts and external communications. While the Dean's office could play a much stronger role in both areas, the university should be influential in creating, supporting, and implementing a strategic fundraising effort for the department.
- *Develop a full service career center.* The College of Built Environments is well-positioned to create a career center that supports all students in the college for job placement, internships and professional development. Given the nature of the programs in the college, a centralized effort could be more efficient and capable of operating at a scale that attracts greater attention from local and regional employers, highlighting the effectiveness and success of its degree programs. Many firms now employ architects, planners and landscape architects, and would prefer to have a one-stop source of potential employees, including a single career day.