

Lack of Diversity in Southern Academia *What Can Progressive Planners Do?*

Jeffrey S. Lowe

THE LEVEL OF DIVERSITY in planning programs in the US South is deplorable. The students in many planning departments seem to be nowhere near matching the demographics within their states, let alone the nation as a whole. Regarding faculty diversity, the situation is much more severe. A simple snapshot of faculty of color at the 23 accredited programs in the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) Region II—that includes all the slave-holding states at the outbreak of the Civil War except for Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Louisiana, Tennessee and Texas—indicates that very few programs retain faculty of color. Black faculty account for an under-representative 7.7 percent of all full-time planning faculty in the US and only 2.4 percent find their academic homes in Region II. Furthermore, these states still retain the highest percentages of African Americans in the nation and only six full-time black women faculty exist in the entire region—three above the

junior rank and two at an institution that awards the Ph.D. in planning. Worse yet, there are no full-time African American male faculty with a Ph.D. in planning in Region II.

This void of diversity is of particular concern to me and I have sought to find a remedy. As a planner, a PNER and a contributor to this special edition of *Progressive Planning Magazine*, I am a rare find in this quest for a solution. Certainly, like other PNERs, I espouse the organization's principles rooted in the promotion of fundamental change in our economic and political system and a commitment to use abilities in a manner that fosters racial equity and social justice. Adherence to such causes is what makes us progressive planners. My uniqueness comes from the fact that I am an African American male planning scholar; one who has been both a student and a faculty member in planning programs at predominately black and white universities in the US South. Born out of my experiences and reflections, I am raising here (for what I hope will be continued discourse among comrades and readers) my central question: Can progressive planning remedy the low levels of faculty and student diver-

sity in planning programs located in the South where the majority of black citizens in the nation reside?

Students Need Mentoring, Programs Need Courageous Leadership

Answering this question requires a look back to almost two decades ago. I entered the master of city and regional planning program (CRP) at Morgan State University, which is located in the Upper South city of Baltimore, Maryland and, at the time, was one of two accredited-HBCU (Historically Black Colleges and Universities) planning programs in the US. Noticeably diverse, the full-time faculty consisted of one African American woman, an African American man, and two Asian men. The program chair clearly articulated that CRP strategically took advantage of being in Baltimore, a “city of neighborhoods,” and these places were rich laboratories to learn about planning more generally as well as specifically in the African American community. A former African American woman faculty member and assistant director of one of the research centers on campus maintained a



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very close relationship with the planning program by remaining involved in by-weekly seminars that brought planner practitioners and educators, policymakers and activists to campus. Many of these individuals were former alumni of the program who often spent significant time talking to students after seminars and doing follow-up. Furthermore, faculty members appeared to be attuned to the interests and capabilities of students. Thus, while encouraged to develop one's skills in planning analytics and the manipulation of tools, an emphasis was also placed on clearly identifying one's interest—to become a “generalist with a specialty.” Faculty committed themselves to helping students find their way while exposing them to different areas of planning.

One particular faculty member returned a paper to me with written comments that included the following question: given your interest in research and reasonably good writing skills, have you considered pursuing the Ph.D. in planning? The faculty member would verbally express this sentiment later on several other occasions. After seeking advice from others, including some

scholars I'd met at the bi-weekly seminars, and contemplating these conversations along with my career objectives, I informed my professors of my decision to apply to a few planning doctoral programs. CRP faculty shared their own experiences with me that often included the “good, bad and ugly” of what it was like to be the only student of color in a program. Also, my professors often facilitated introductions and exposure to Ph.D. faculty at other universities, and willingly offered assistance in identifying those doctoral programs that would “best fit” my interest. In the end, I felt affirmed in my decision and equipped with confidence and understanding to begin doctoral studies at Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey.

After earning my Ph.D. from Rutgers, I relocated to the deep South—Jackson, Mississippi—and joined the racially-diverse faculty of the new department of urban and regional planning at Jackson State University (DURP-JSU). Emerging out of a 25-year desegregation legal battle and subsequent settlement (*Jake Ayers v. State of Mississippi*), DURP-JSU continued the legacy of agitation and assertive action for social change and racial

equity for those with few options. William M. Harris, one of the first African Americans to gain a Ph.D. in planning and a scholar of black community development was founding chair of DURP-JSU. More importantly, Harris provided strong leadership and the protection necessary for a nascent department and faculty which maintained a unique set of technical and research competencies that did not exist among the other graduate programs on campus. Faculty were encouraged to be good teachers and productive (even activist) scholars while building a department that promoted an inclusive process of relationship building between the university and community for an agenda of social justice. In some instances, DURP-JSU junior faculty advocated for changes opposed by top university administrators. When this occurred, faculty in other departments often offered kudos for “being courageous as junior faculty” and, acknowledging the difference a strong chair can make, expressed desires for similar leadership in their programs. Indeed, given the institutional culture of top-down influence at JSU, the support and cover provided by the chair expanded the space to become more

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like the scholar of my aspiration as I engaged in a number of efforts including service as Chairperson of the Planning and the Black Community Division (PBCD) of the American Planning Association (APA), co-principal investigator of a community-university partnership; and member of the city's task force to end chronic homelessness.

When Racial Diversity Alone Is Not Enough

In 2006, I joined the faculty of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at Florida State University (DURP-FSU) and became the first African American tenure-track faculty in its 41-year history. Although my service to PBCD was coming to a close, I believed DURP-FSU would support my push for deepening understanding about the interconnections between planning and race, participatory-action research, and activism around diversity in the planning profession. However, FSU colleagues urged me not to take on any more national-level service or to become involved in local policymaking. Even after receiving a nomination to the mayor's affordable housing task force, senior faculty members suggested that I decline it.

I wondered what the reason was for these pressures. Perhaps, some were sincerely concerned about my ability to expand my scholarship and teaching. But in other cases I saw an unwillingness to venture out of a safe space and challenge the institutional status quo that included

Southern attitudes and practices that fortified barriers against progressive planning for social justice and racial equity. Clearly, courageous leadership is needed that challenges this status quo. With more than 100 tenured and tenure-track faculty in the College that includes DURP-FSU, only one African American can be counted among members. No African Americans have received promotion with tenure under the administration of the current Dean that has lasted for a decade. For a planning program at a flagship university in a state with the second-largest black alone population, and black in combination with another race population, to be un-supportive and lacking in diversity of faculty of color seems alarming, even insulting to the profession!

Three Strategies for Progressive Planners

It is my hope that sharing my experiences and reflections illuminated the importance of the following three attributes necessary in increasing the numbers of students and faculty of color in the US South:

1. mentorship that includes affirmation and exposure to a number of opportunities in planning including the Ph.D.;
2. courageous leadership that protects and supports junior faculty while challenging the status quo; and
3. willing acceptance of the totality of racial diversity rather

than assimilation of persons of color into existing cultural-institutional norms that will never offer a good fit.

Developing these three attributes would be a progressive planning response. However, the current dearth of racial diversity in Southern planning education exists because there is not a critical mass of progressive planners inside the universities of Region II. Without a critical mass that breaks down isolation and marginalization, students and faculty of color will continue to be left to fend for themselves as they struggle against oppression in academic settings that tend to devalue their humanity, experiences and expertise.

Looking forward, although I read no signs on the horizon that a significant progressive change will occur through individual departmental efforts in the South, there are still steps to be taken. Non-racially diverse planning programs must move beyond mere cordial acknowledgment of difference and break through the barriers of unpreparedness and unwillingness to support the totality of what diversity means. Diversity is more than others looking different than you and includes accepting variety in experiences, perspectives and purposeful action. Accepting the totality of diversity entails embracing African American faculty who in the progressive planning tradition aggressively seek to provoke understanding that challenges the prevailing notions of students and faculty, and who work rather intensely with

communities to change structures for greater social justice and racial equity. The following seem to be feasible, more modest steps:

- The time is now to create an open and candid discourse that leads to collective actions instead of individual ones undertaken by progressive planners. Planners Network should begin to tackle this deeply-rooted challenge by holding a retreat or conference activities with consideration given to the three attributes mentioned above, convening members from Region II and other places for a period of introspection, accountability and challenge. One of the initial objectives of the network was to increase the racial diversity of the profession. Have we forgotten this fact and failed to hold ourselves, colleagues, and administrators responsible for pursuing agendas that fail at fundamental transformation of systems consistently producing significantly low-levels of diversity in planning education and subsequently the profession? Some knowledge could be gained about processes undertaken over the years on this front by telling “our stories” and by cooperatively assessing successes and failures, and capacities and inadequacies, with the intention of developing strategies for future action.
- Given that three of the four accredited HBCU planning programs are located in Region II, these academic units should

intensify their efforts and work to garner more attention. Even among progressive planners, rarely have HBCU planning programs received consideration for contributing to racial diversity in planning.

- Another strategy should be to ally with or join in solidarity and membership with organizations seeking to influence change in the planning academy throughout the US, such as ACSP’s Planners of Color Interest Group (POCIG) and the Standing Committee on Diversity (SCD). At its 2007 Conference in Gary, Indiana, PBCD sponsored student fellowships to participate in workshops about pursuing the Ph.D. in planning. PBCD’s history includes other initiatives such as worthy attempts at increasing the numbers of black planners in practice, AICP and the academy. No doubt, PBCD, POCIG, SCD and the Latinos and Planning Division of APA would welcome having more comrades in this struggle. For certain, should these alternatives be unacceptable, doing nothing is not a viable option. **P²**