

## **Celebrating 100 years at Illinois ---**

### **“Dare To Social Welfare Plan”**

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As part of the 100<sup>th</sup> year celebration, Lew Hopkins emailed department faculty and program graduates of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning in mid-July asking us to define the ideas and practices that identify a unique part of the “Illinois School” of planning. After a month of giving thought to what I identify as unique I came across two important events in August 2013 that both identifies a segment of who we are and how we can become better.

#### **Future Excellence**

The first event is a new 3-year strategic plan of the university entitled “Visioning Future Excellence.” To me this plan speaks directly to the urban planning department faculty whose model of teaching planning students developed over the last 100 years. Early on we developed “workshop” classes that combine “Service and Learning” for professional planners in training. Our workshops have given students opportunities to take on real planning problems often with real clients. One of the many planning problems involves creating and strengthening

residential neighborhoods that build and retain high levels of “social capital” which encourages diversity and bringing the diverse neighborhood residents together to blend their different interests and skills.

“Visioning Future Excellence” is also about improving diversity of faculty and students, recruiting underrepresented groups and greater collaboration among the diverse faculty and undergraduate student body. The core of this plan is more creative and transformative learning creating a more tolerant and egalitarian society and improving how we interact and plan together at the community level. Courses will increase by 50% under this new plan that will include more integrative research and study across the campus and around the world. As examples of “integrative learning experiences” the new campus plan has identified learning experiences in “capstone courses, internships and service learning classes,” all examples of what the Department of Urban and Regional planning already does and has been doing for some time. But above all our workshops with real life problems and clients have been the unique focus over at least the last 50 years of our planning program at the University of Illinois with renowned planning analysts and practitioners who have already proven to be excellent and creative planning teachers.

## Racial Equality

The second event is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King Junior's vision of racial equality outlined in his famous and inspiring "I had a dream" speech. A number of nationwide studies show that we have not reached racial equality 50 years after that speech. To the contrary, the gaps in poverty, unemployment, incompleteness of basic high school education and many other measures have increased for African Americans during these 50 years and the gaps are now the widest they have ever been [See July-August 2013 issue of *Poverty and Race Research Action Council*.]

There are some statistics that have clearly shown black and white relations have improved over the 50 years, specially through the integration of public schools and the more highly educated blacks have landed top jobs in corporations and all professional education including our countries highest job, President of the United States. More blacks and whites now live in proximity to each other in some residential neighborhoods. However, a lot of these advances have been declining over the last few years of the "Great Recession." Median white income was \$67,175 two years ago compared to only \$39,670 for blacks; and when calculating assets minus liabilities median wealth is only \$6,446 on average for blacks compared to a whopping \$91,405 on average for whites.

What is even more troubling is that the majority of white America believes racial equality has been reached 56%; while 79% of black Americans say we have a long way to go. Whites seem oblivious to the growing inequality. [See Emily Alpert, *Pew Research Center Survey, "Have we achieved Racial Equality?"*].

A number of scholars have looked into the growing "selective" blindness by whites and have titled their findings "Structural Racism" that has resulted in the increasing disadvantages to black and Latino households when these households interact with all types of business and government institutions, ranging from police departments, to classrooms, to courtrooms and the like.

I think the two events of growing racial inequality and the university's future excellence plan can and must be linked or they will both flounder. In order for the university to achieve "Visioning Future Excellence" we also need to make the dream of racial equality a reality. After all, both events strive to strengthen diversity by recruiting the underrepresented and by more service learning courses where students in training are also helping create more stable interracial neighborhoods and building community ties that increase social capital and quality of life.

## **Service Learning ---Early History**

I started teaching in our planning program in the fall semester of 1970 and an outreach to the black community had already been designed and at work for several years. It was a joint student project of Architecture and Urban Planning and was called "The Community Advocacy Depot." With the help of John Lee Johnson, the Champaign city councilman representing the black community, the students were given an empty one story building on North First Street in Champaign which at that time was the heart of the black community business district. The planning students had assembled a library of city plans, land use and zoning maps, building codes and the like as well as lists of city leaders as well as builders, bankers and others who would be asked to participate to complete new businesses and affordable housing. I was told by the planning faculty member overseeing the Depot students (Robert Heifetz) that the students who helped conceive the Depot had graduated and the new students thought the work hours the depot demanded outweighed the course credit they were getting. I quickly saw the work was beyond the students training in some cases and tasks like starting a new business took years to get approved, funded and up and running. The life of the Depot was clearly coming to a close.

Despite its demise, I observed and learned a great deal from my short interaction with the Depot. The students had no specific project assignments and the needs of the community were too varied and the tasks too vague. True service learning workshops require a clear focus and boundaries. The work project must be doable at the level of the students education and require acceptable work hours that fit the credits of the workshop. In order for the workshop to hit the ground running the faculty overseeing the project must have specific sites and clients on board and prepared to provide considerable time with the students. Both the teacher and the clients need to keep students focused so the project can be completed in a semester. This doesn't mean there can't be projects that are already ongoing or will require several years to complete, it means that the assignment of work for a given semester must be clearly defined with a beginning and an end and the students shown where their contribution will fit in the overall long run. This almost always requires an off campus nonprofit organization or service that along with the teacher must do a sizeable amount of work in advance of the start of a new semester. It is the on campus teacher of the workshop who must identify how this workshop fits into the curriculum of study in the students overall planning education.

## **Service Learning --- to the Present**

Here is a quick summary of some of the service learning courses that dealt with African American and Latino communities and civil rights in the years following the end of the Community Advocacy Depot. Not all were workshops. More traditional course settings such as lecture and discussion or even planning model building can include a service learning component or task.

I had several ad hoc courses over the years designed by students of an “independent study” of their choosing with my role was facilitator and guidance counselor. I had three wonderful experiences of guiding an independent study group on race and diversity. Urban planners can and have worked on “defining setting and maintaining land use patterns and zoning regulations, building codes and occupancy standards which....can affect how integrated and segregated people live, (See below for quoted source).” The students wanted to study the racial equality of locations left for low income households by these planning patterns and regulations. They showed that they can affect quality of schools, opportunities for jobs, safety and crime rates, and many other factors that affect equal opportunity and quality of life. Their conclusion was that planners needed to know the impact of the planning process can result in inequality and they felt their study should become

a required course for all planners, students and practicing professionals. Their study was undertaken in the fall of 1997 and spring 1998. I quoted above from page 3 of their findings titled: *“A précis on the need for a required course on race and diversity in the urban planning department at UIUC.”*

The single largest University of Illinois attempt to develop partnerships with community service agencies has been ESLARP (East Saint Lewis Action Research Program), and thanks of a number of faculty and the leadership of Professor Ken Reardon of our Department of Urban and Regional Planning. There have been a number of other programs attempting to develop partnerships between the university and the community. One of which I was heavily involved was the Strategic Partnership Illinois Initiatives (SPII). Another was called the campus and community Exchange Center, another was entitled Action Research Illinois, and yet another entitled the Rural Partners Housing Task Force.

Being the largest to date it might be worth quickly defining ESLARP. It began about 20+ years ago by the three departments, Urban Planning, Architecture and Landscape Architecture with the College of Fine and Applied Arts as the overall organizer. The ESLARP program had at least one faculty member from each department that planned and oversaw the service learning courses. All the planning projects were in the

city of East St. Lewis and most of the residents were African American. A total of 11 East St. Louis neighborhoods were organized and helped identify and prioritize projects. The neighborhoods housed the students who visited to conduct interviews, measure and map sites, and the like. As an example the students and faculty of the landscape architecture department designed new parks and cleaned up the public right of ways in several neighborhoods. A major undertaking each year was a “Spring Retreat” trip with busloads of students who worked each day of the retreat on a variety of projects.

The university provided funding for one full time site manager stationed in East St. Lewis. There was one full time campus secretary. There were an impressive output of plans and research projects by the Workshops. Nevertheless, as I write this paper it marks the second year since the ESLARP project was abandoned. A new program still nested in the College of Fine and Applied Arts is called Action Research Illinois and takes proposals for projects from throughout the State.

### **What Works Best?**

A University and community partnership requires both entities to be funded and they must have equal responsibility to set and support project priorities. Both need to be financially secure and equally knowledgeable about what they can and cannot accomplish using a service learning mode. That is a lot to ask

as we have recently seen when The Urban League, a community based partner went, bankrupt and closed down.

When funds are as tight as they have been for the last seven years starting and maintaining service learning projects can be very difficult. These programs are often underfunded on both sides of the university and community partnership. Even a land grant university like Illinois where one might anticipate more interest in public service projects, tight money can prohibit this. When budgets are tight a university is more likely to be cutting back on new experimental programs and faculty or at least cutting back on new hiring. It might also be seen as prudent for untenured faculty to stick to the best known ways to find research funds and publish findings.

So what would be the least costly and risky service learning model? The new program “Visioning Future Excellence” with its major commitment to expanding student and faculty diversity is a good start.

When we look at the university and its resources the biggest one is the student body who genuinely want to combine service to the community as they learn more about the skills they want to master and get course credit to boot. A better education results from a more diverse population of faculty and students. Knowing and working with diverse cultures is the first step to eliminating “structural racism.”

One large community partner working with the university as a whole is expensive and inflexible. There are a number of not-for-profit community based services in Champaign-Urbana and throughout the county and state and state of Illinois that can link at the college or even department levels. Some of these non-profits have been working with students for years. The faculty overseeing a service learning project would make initial contact with a non-profit and describe the service work load. Once defined the classes and services to the community begin.

Here are two examples from the affordable housing and neighborhood revitalization courses which I used in teach. The first affordable housing example comes from Habitat for Humanity. There are two separate Habitats for Humanity, one is community based the second is campus/student body run. Both use the same model for getting affordable homes built and both work with the cities who provide lots to build upon. There are two directors and professional boards who oversee the construction. There is no college, department or faculty that overseeing the related course work that is associated with the affordable housing design projects and therefore no course credit. If this had been a course urban planning it might have a neighborhood revitalization design, or a civil engineering course designing new and improved streets, sidewalks and street lighting where the affordable housing is being built. Or an

Architecture course to rehabilitate and upgrade older houses. And so on.

The second model is Homestead Corporation, formed over 20 years ago in part by an urban planning student named Janet Smith who is now a housing professor at the University of Illinois Chicago. Homestead provides a wide variety of affordable housing both rental and home ownership, managed and independent. When we were seeking federal funding we had to prove that there was adequate demand for SRO (Single Room Occupancy) housing units. The Housing class designed a survey instrument that showed eligibility and interest in the housing. The class then had to find the scattered, mostly homeless, individuals. The research showed that 83 individuals were eligible and would like to live in an SRO out of 140 interviewed and the new housing would accommodate 24 units, making the project eligible for federal funding support. No one else could afford this critical element of the project.

## **Conclusions**

Over the years friends and colleagues from around the world have asked me why I stayed with the planning program at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. My answer was and is twofold. First I loved and respected my co-faculty. Second every semester I looked forward to teach and learn from a new set of students. By and large the students at Illinois were more

knowledgeable and hardworking than those at: University of California, Berkley, the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University in New York. It is because of them that we are consistently one of the highest rated planning programs in the world.

My goal for the department as we enter our next 100 years is that we undertake a new effort to achieve an old and worsening problem. Racial inequality not only persists it is growing. As good as our courses may be we need to improve what we teach and what the young planners need to know. The title of this celebration is “DARE TO PLAN.” Ok, here is my dare to you: Planning needs to be at the forefront of ending racial inequality and ending “structural Racism.” We must be a country made up of one and only one society. The first step is that we need to recruit more Black and Latino students in our program, and we need to be talking as one planning faculty about how to make planning one of the answers not part of the problem. Service learning is a good idea in general but we need more comprehensive planning. We need to discuss how we create “social capital” in inter-racial neighborhoods. This means knowing our neighbors their strengths and their needs, to creates and strengthens communities.