

**Commentary - Beyond Recruitment: Comparing Experiences of Climate and Diversity  
between International Students and Domestic Students of Color in U.S. Urban Planning  
Programs**

**Abstract**

American universities are becoming globalized in curriculum and enrollment and benefit from international students who contribute to diversity. As the share of international students in planning programs has risen, little is known about their experiences beyond recruitment, and how experiences as a “minoritized” group compare to domestic students of color. We report findings from interviews with graduate students in U.S. planning programs and compare international student experiences and perceptions with domestic students of color. We recommend ways that programs can improve international student retention and support the diversity of experiences that these students bring to U.S. planning programs.

**Keywords:** education, global context of planning, international planning and development

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## **Main Text**

Planning education should prepare practitioners for pluralistic contexts. Curricula and accreditation requirements have incorporated global issues and perspectives as partial answers to the challenge of engaging globalizing communities (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019). These changes reflect the growth of international students enrolled in planning programs over the last decade, who offset a decline of enrollment of domestic groups (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019; Doan 2017; Lowe et al. 2016).

However, little is known about international planning students after recruitment, particularly around issues of campus and department climate. Studies from other disciplines found that international students reported discrimination and racial microaggressions (Hanassab 2006; Mwangi 2016), particularly those from non-Western countries (Rienties et al. 2012).<sup>1</sup> Another study of geography programs found that international graduate students perceived their departments to have unfavorable working environments compared to domestic students (Solem, Lee, and Schlemper 2009). These experiences may reflect a “minoritization” of international students who may face similar social and structural challenges as domestic students of color (Carey and Mariam 1980).

We analyze interviews with international students and domestic students of color in graduate planning programs.<sup>2</sup> We assess student adjustment in programs and how the processes of minoritization present challenges or barriers. Also, by comparing experiences of international planning students with students of color, we provide a broader understanding of graduate student

climate issues and work to expand our understanding of non-White experiences in planning education.

### **International Students in Higher Education**

International students promote multicultural learning, reduce stereotypical thinking, and increase understanding of global interdependence (Peterson et al. 1999). These exchanges push students to reexamine their own biases and how they draw boundaries (Pandit and Alderman 2004). U.S. institutions have formed strategic partnerships with colleges and universities in other countries, creating opportunities and pipelines for international students to enter American colleges (Gopal and Streitwieser 2016). International students also pay tuition at rates that balance institutional or departmental budgets (Field 2018; Fischer 2015b, 2018; Reisberg 2016).

The increased demand from and for international students has raised questions about how to meet student needs in the context of adversarial reactions. Some higher education institutions claim these students compete with domestic students for admissions, financial aid, and jobs (Crawford 2018; Fischer 2015a; Zamudio-Suarez 2018). Hate speech and other acts of race-based violence have also been directed toward international students (Fischer 2015a).

Student climate is critical because it affects educational outcomes (Crisp, Taggart, and Nora 2015). Studies about international student experiences often focus on logistical challenges, such as visa applications, language barriers, cultural differences, curriculum needs, and currency exchanges (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019; Hechanova-Alampay et al. 2002; Lee and Rice 2007). However, these issues compound social and psychological challenges (e.g., homesickness, isolation, marginalization, discrimination [Hanassab 2006; Hechanova-Alampay et al. 2002; Lee and Rice 2007; Zhou et al. 2008) and extend adjust time (Turnage 2017).

Scholars have conceptualized the “minoritization” of international students, who have similar experiences as students of color due to their racial background and/or national origin (Carey and Mariam 1980; Hanassab 2006; Rampersad 2007). For instance, non-Western international students at a Dutch university felt less socially integrated than peers from Western countries (Rienties et al. 2012), and students from Africa and the Middle East at U.S. institutions reported more discrimination than students from other countries (Hanassab 2006). Minoritization of international students has implications for departments, as interventions to promote inclusive climates could affect both international students and students of color.

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) and its committees have historically engaged with issues on international student enrollment and globalizing curricula (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019; Hibbard et al. 2011; Lowe et al. 2016; Sanyal and Jammal 1992; Sen et al. 2014; Wubneh 2009). Recently, the Planning Accreditation Board (2017) added “Global Dimensions of Planning” to accreditation standards. Still, there needs to be more studies on international student climate and diversity issues. The ACSP Planners of Color Interest Group (POCIG) initiated a study of student attitudes and perceptions about diversity within planning departments (Greenlee et al. 2018). One critical finding was that international students were more likely to experience discrimination and be aware of other students’ experiencing discrimination than native-born students (Greenlee et al. 2018).

## **Methodology**

This study answers three research questions:

- 1) How do international student perspectives on graduate programs and climate compare to student of color perspectives?
- 2) What are gaps in student support in planning programs?

3) What recommendations can improve support of international students and students of color?

As part of POCIG's study (Greenlee et al. 2018), we conducted interviews with students seeking a degree in planning graduate programs from July 2016 through June 2017. Interviewees were asked about their experiences in the classroom, department climate, and recommendations about how to improve student support. Interview recordings were transcribed and analyzed using inductive coding to develop a coding dictionary (Strauss and Corbin 1998), and the team reviewed codes for validity.

## **Results**

Forty-two interviews were conducted with international students (n=28) and students of color (n=14). Student of color participants self-identified as African American/Black (4), Latinx (4), Black/Latinx (2), and Asian Americans (4). International student participants identified with 12 countries: Bangladesh, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Germany, India, Indonesia, Korea, Mexico, Nepal, and Taiwan.<sup>3</sup> Interviewees represented 17 different schools in 11 states located in the West (13), Midwest (14), East (7), and South (8). Most interviewees (25) were doctoral students, and half identified as female (26).

### *Interactions with Faculty*

Most international students felt welcomed by faculty. Faculty members offered advice on life in the U.S. beyond program requirements, including where to live or schools for children. International students also shared how faculty accommodated language difficulties by giving them more time to respond in class. However, 40% of all interviewees (n=17) reported experience with discrimination and microaggressions. Participants with negative experiences were primarily female, highlighting the importance of intersectionality (Grant and Zwier 2011).

For example, an international doctoral student felt marginalized because a White professor commented that her country was “bad” or “dumb.” Students also described discrimination from faculty of the same background--a doctoral student experienced sexism by a male professor from her country, who “knows he cannot disrespect the [White] female, but knows the treatment, power dynamics based on his authority as male and as a professor [with me].”

About 80% (n=13) of students of color felt disconnected with professors who were overwhelming White. For instance, a master’s student shared, “Most faculty are White and male...and their backgrounds aren’t linked to things around me.” A master’s student of color shared how she perceived faculty to be biased because of her different background: “Fairness wasn’t there...There were picks and chooses with the same race and gender.” A doctoral student of color felt stereotyped by professors: “I’ve had professor say something like, ‘of course you have something to say about it,’ like ‘because you’re the feisty Latina’...So they’re not taking you seriously.”

These incidences limit students’ interactions with faculty. One international student felt “very powerless because what’s the point? It won’t change too much” (Ph.D. student). While beyond this commentary, these instances highlight how female students may experience different power dynamics than male students in planning programs.

### *Classroom Climate*

With more diverse classmates, students had positive experiences and appreciated exposure to different backgrounds. For instance, a domestic doctoral student connected with international students, which alleviated her feelings of isolation: “There’s a richness of culture which is great, so we introduce each other to different foods. Maybe they’re as lonely as I am.” Another domestic doctoral student desired greater representation amongst students of color, but

he felt that “diversity came from international students, which gives a whole unique perspective and it's needed.” A master’s international student also felt students of color was important:

“Despite the program's claims to value diversity, this is not what we learn. Other students of color in my program prepare me to work in diverse communities.”

Still, about 57% of interviewees felt alienated and isolated because of microaggressions and interactions in class. For instance, a student of color “learned to censor” herself because a White student asked her, “What is your ethnic background?” [...] It’s benign, but, it’s an unfair question. It’s not a question I would ask her.” An international doctoral student felt other students “treat you that you are ignorant” when they asked her, “Do you even have freeways in your country?” In courses with primarily White students, students of color felt pressure to blend in. One master’s student mentioned “there was a point in time where I had to censor myself [...] I think I was indirectly not valued.” A female master’s student similarly felt uncomfortable: “I cannot rock the boat too much because I’m already on the outside.”

International students also felt isolated because they lacked knowledge about the U.S. A master’s student shared how she qualifies statements because she is unfamiliar with American racial issues: “In [country], we don’t have that Black/White situation [...] when there was a discussion about diversity, I say I’m sorry, but I am from a different culture.” A female master’s student described other experiences with alienation: “Planning is determined by the kind of environment you live in, everything is focused around the school’s city [...] whenever the professor said a name, we had to Google that, so it was difficult to follow the lecture.” Another female master’s student did not relate to classroom examples because faculty “have experience on local sites and they wouldn’t give a similar international example.” Unstated social, cultural,



and historical contexts presented challenges for not only for comprehension of specific course material, but also larger structural issues related to diversity in the U.S.

### *Department Policies*

Participants described a range of interactions with planning departments, from ambivalence to negative reactions. Students of color did not perceive their departments to be recruiting or funding students of color. In contrast, international students had difficulty with funding when policies were inconsistent or tailored to domestic students.

Many students of color (79%) felt their departments did not actively address issues of diversity. A doctoral student shared “I get a little outraged that there is such underrepresentation of minorities and it’s a non-issue for my department [...] people think we shouldn’t talk about diversity. When you pretend there aren’t differences, you diminish the positive from diversity.” Another doctoral student found her department only responded if issues arose: “My department is more reactionary [...] I really can’t tell right now if people feel 100% comfortable saying what they feel.” A master’s student felt her department was defensive and had “negative interactions with the heads of the department” when inquiring about developing an alumni of color network:

For older people, new to the area, people of color, people of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, we don’t have resources. [Department] is resistant [...] and their attitude is, ‘because we’re [public], the tuition is cheap.’ It’s not cheap, we’re paying for it.

Students identified a need for departments to do more to increase student of color enrollment. A doctoral student observed: “There are programs to bring in underrepresented students, but professors didn’t seem to be involved with educational equity programs.” Another doctoral interviewee saw how students of color had to find alternative employment to supplement paying for education: “We have students of color in our program, but they’re teaching elsewhere [...] so students on campus are mostly White students who comprise most of

our program” (female). Students of color also felt a sense of disempowerment: “We have [diversity] initiatives, but it’s hard to be the lone voice—I’m only one of three people of color” (master’s student, female).

International students reported difficulties with department policies, particularly around funding (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019). Some felt disadvantaged by informal processes to acquire an assistantship. Without transparency, a female master’s student shared: “No one knows how people get picked. I think international students are on the back burner because my White friends already has an assistantship. I haven’t got it, but they may tell me a week before school starts.” Another doctoral student described this funding disparity to be “just the way the department is set up... the opportunities for us to find is very limited” (female).

Other inconsistencies relate to university policies on whether international students pay in-state tuition. Some schools offer in-state tuition when a student is a teaching assistant while others charge out-of-state tuition regardless of employment. Many international students know they are offered less financial aid than domestic students because of citizenship status. Yet, as a doctoral student shared, “I’m paying full tuition, and [faculty] don’t care about me.”

#### *Seeking Support Outside of the Department*

Interviewees sought resources beyond their departments when they felt unsupported. An international student expressed, “We have fewer allies here, it’s more difficult for us when, you know, like we are recruited but nobody supports you” (female, Ph.D. student). More than a third of interviewees found resources through affinity groups outside of their programs. These groups helped them connect with people of similar background. A domestic master’s student participated in a university-wide affinity group because “it helps that I’m able to interact with [similar] people outside of planning because I don’t feel like I can do that in planning at all.” A

doctoral student of color expressed “it’s been really hard to not feel recognized, supported or understand in planning. I had to go to ethnic studies to find people who understood me.”

For international students, these groups provided information on everyday life, including utilities, public transit, currency, and immigration documentation. These issues were stressful and compounded the challenges of graduate school. A male doctoral student described how:

It took two days to [set up my] internet—I don’t have a car and so take bus and find some places and rejected because I don’t bring some document. I go back home, and that process is time-consuming and is exhausting.

Another doctoral student explained how these stressors affect her: “You worry about your visa. It’s this additional burden, you can feel isolated [...] I have to learn the whole system on my own rather than having to learn from somebody who has already been there.” Through the eyes of our participants, departments can do more to support international students through resources and policies.

## **Recommendations**

We offer the following recommendations for ACSP and planning programs to support international students and students of color (see Table 1):

[Insert Table 1 about here]

- *Train Faculty:* ACSP and planning programs can educate faculty on microaggressions and cultural competency. Departments and faculty can use existing tools to evaluate whether they are inclusive (ACSP Task Force on Global Planning Education 2019; Trevino et al. 2009; USC Center for Urban Education n.d.).
- *Gather Existing Student Resources:* ACSP and planning programs can gather information about classroom and department modules on cross-cultural competency to share among member schools. These resources could be integrated into student orientation to promote

respectful student-to-student engagement in the classroom. ACSP could also aggregate information on summer bridge programs that can support international student language acquisition (University of Maryland 2019; Voxy 2018).

- *Increase International Student Funding:* More universities are offering international students with discounted tuition or scholarships (Redden 2018). There are also external funding for international students. Sixty-four schools in fall 2019 provided renewable scholarships that cover half of the tuition for international students (YouAreWelcomeHere 2019). ACSP members can work with university administrators to partner with these external sources when universities cannot offer in-state tuition.
- *Encourage Planning Programs to Develop Arrival Guides:* New student materials are a vital resource for adjustment. Departments can work with campus offices to develop the guide, such as international student offices, organizations, minority recruitment coordinators, and alumni. These arrival guides could incorporate information about living in an area and local city history. ACSP can also encourage departments to reassess their materials to avoid jargon and acronyms that are not easily translatable (Brenn-White 2016).

This article is the first to compare international students and students of color in planning programs. More are needed because of the non-representative sample and relatively small number of universities included. Future studies disentangling differences by student background can address students' difficulties in planning programs. Finally, we aim to continue conversations around international students and their links to students of color, which will work to expand our understanding of non-White experiences in planning education.

## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Racial microaggressions are interactions that are intentional and unintentional and communicate negative insults or hostile messages (Sue et al., 2007).

<sup>2</sup> “Students of color” hereon after refers to domestic students who identify as non-White.

<sup>3</sup> Taiwan is counted separately from China because student(s) self-identified as Taiwanese. We exclude information on race/ethnicity and nationality to protect identities. Where relevant, we note differences between master’s and doctoral student experiences (Solem et al. 2009).

However, interviews did not focus on level of education, and future studies are needed to further disaggregate by student level of education and additional characteristics to understand patterns of reported incidences.

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