Course Evaluation: Considering Equitable Trajectories

Suzanne Lettieri with contributions from Aonor Washington, Brandon Battle, and Cederick Campbell

With ongoing externalized pressure following the socio-cultural turmoil of 2020, there are currently widespread attempts to increase diversity in architecture schools across the US. Amidst this active recruitment, there is a real need to evaluate recent methods of attracting and retaining underrepresented students. Defined preparatory programs are initiatives set up to make an impact in introducing underrepresented students to the discipline and provide an on-ramp to the pursuit of architecture. While these processes have aimed to produce more equitable pathways into higher education, there is a need for broader-scaled networks that stitch these discrete practices to sustain commitments to diversity and equity.

In Spring 2017, Dr. Sharon Sutton visited the University of Michigan to speak about her recently published book *When Ivory Towers Were Black: A Story about Race in America's Cities and Universities.* In the book, she tells the story of Columbia's "experiment" to actively recruit minority students in response to the civil rights protests and campus rebellions of the late 1960s and in Sutton's words "made the recruits the stars of the school."[1] In light of the present-day tumultuous socio-political landscape, Sutton's 2017 visit presciently provided a historic context for the radical framing of engaged work that has since become commonplace in contemporary architecture schools. In hindsight, the lecture also underscored the academy's relationship to social justice and reminds us of the work that remains to be done.

That current measures to increase diversity and equity are insufficient comes as no surprise to a contemporary audience, but Sutton's observations then, with Columbia's 1968 efforts in mind, took issue with solely data-based recruitment strategies aimed at increasing the Black and Brown student "pipeline" into universities; what she called "a ruse that diverts the attention from the here and now to an ever-elusive future." Among many potent lessons from the lecture, Sutton's points on creating an "educational ladder," the importance of continuous tracking and support for Black and Brown students, institutional focus on attrition, and a student-focused education that reflects lived experience resonate strongly with gaps in current initiatives. Of utmost importance was what Sutton described as the failure of Columbia's epic recruitment experiment: its inability to persist, adapt, and "transform the structural conditions that underpin white privilege."

Over the past ten years, 13 out of 53,[2] Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) have initiated early-

1 Sutton, Sharon Egretta. When Ivory Towers Were Black: Lessons in Re-imagining Universities and Communities. Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan. Ann Arbor, Michigan. September 26, 2017.

2 This data was derived from a combination of researching all accredited school's departmental websites, and performing internet searches containing the keywords "underrepresented," "high school students," "architecture prep," "architecture development program," and "architecture program."

3 Early-learning programs take different shapes and vary from intense, semester-long design studios like the one Aonor, Brandon, and Cederick were a part of (these include University of Michigan: ArcPrep, Princeton University: ArcPrep, University of Southern California: A-Lab) to short-term programs that span several days up to a week (Rice University: Summer Immersion Program, Virginia Tech: Explore VT), workshops (SCI-ARC: Pop-Arc), mini-courses (University of Buffalo: Architecture + Education),) after-school classes (Pratt Institute: DICE), and programs that roll out over several years (Pratt Institute: Pratt Young Scholars). These initiatives are unique in that they offer free design experiences yet remain tethered to a university. While the degree of intensity varies depending on time and resources, the programs share a similar ambition and focus on exposure, support, and empowerment.

4 From interview with Cederick Campbell.

5 The average candidate NCARB. "Demographics: AXP and ARE." Accessed March 3, 2022. https://www.ncarb.org/nbtn2021/demographics-axp-are.

learning programs for underrepresented students that introduce architecture as a career pathway before the college application process ensues.[3] From 2016-2018 I was a Michigan-Mellon Fellow in "Egalitarianism and the Metropolis," a multi-faceted fellowship that included full-time teaching for a Detroit-based pre-college architecture program (ArcPrep)—a design and research project—and administrative responsibilities. The position exposed me to the detrimental effects of status quo recruitment strategies, and the roadblocks that students face outside of the classroom environment which impact continuity beyond. My experiences in Detroit affirmed that along with inventive pedagogical strategies, more attention and creative thought must be given to tasks that are typically deemed to be non-design-related or administrative. Recruitment, post-evaluation, and large-scale mentorship are just as important as course content in providing students with an egalitarian, human-centered education.

Written with contributions from three of my former Detroit high school students who now study architecture at a collegiate level, this essay calls for new measures that prepare students to evaluate institutions and the discipline at large, beckoning for a provision of tools to be purveyed to unlock genuine interest and think critically about a future in and of architecture.

"How long will it take to become an architect?" and "How much money will I make?" were frequent questions asked by high school students in ArcPrep. These concerns came before the less tangible social challenges emerged—if students were at the top of the class and made it through to elite architectural education, they would most likely for the first time in their lives be a minority in their environment. Cederick Campbell, who is completing his undergraduate degree in Architecture but has ambitions to follow in the late Virgil Abloh's footsteps as a fashion designer shares:

"Socially, being an Architecture student isn't easy. I am 1 of 5 black students in my graduating class of about 35. It doesn't feel like a family at all. I've noticed a pattern of everyone gravitating toward people who look similar to them; forcing me and my black peers to gravitate toward each other as well. The closest thing I have to 'family' as an architecture student is my friend… who has helped me more than my last two professors."[4]

While roughly half of new NCARB record holders identify as a person of color, "the proportion of African American candidates in the profession has seen little change over the past decade and continues to be underrepresented when compared to the U.S. Census data." Furthermore, Black Americans report the longest licensure path of 15.2 years.[5] This speaks to Sutton's concerns on the validity of "pipelines" if students are not even coming out the other end (i.e. arriving as a licensed professional). These figures bring to the fore several important questions: what does it mean to experience an architectural education in which one may be the only Black student in a graduating class, what role does mentorship play in a 15+ year path to licensure, and, more broadly, how can we imagine alternative professional trajectories?

When I asked what my former student Aonor Washington remembered from her first day of architecture school her response did not miss a beat: "Wow, I'm the only Black girl." While Aonor explained that initial shock wore off after a year, what has stuck with her is the constant comparison amongst her white peers and the need to one-up each other: "I still don't understand the secrecy–no one talks about the confusion, or how they know what steps to take–it leads to the feeling that you're on the outside of an unnamed club." This secrecy and underlying competition runs counter to Aonor's impression of what being in a studio would mean,

asking "aren't we a collective?" Aonor further recalled her feelings during the transition between ArcPrep at starting at UM:

> "As a Black student entering a PWI campus at a young age I already had my mind focused on representing not only the people from my high school but people within the creative Black community. Being chosen to be the student speaker of my graduating ArcPrep class was a bit shocking because I assumed that a male figure would be chosen to represent our group. The thought of speaking in front of people that I did not know, and held so much power over my possible future education or opportunities, frightened me."[6]

In 2020, 1,482 Black students were enrolled in Accredited Architecture schools in the United States (including Bachelor, Master, and Doctor of Architecture degrees).[7] Out of the 136 institutions offering accredited programs, 24 are listed as Minority Serving Institutions (MSI), with 543 Black students enrolled in these schools.[8] The remaining 949 students enrolled in the 112 Predominantly White Institutions (PWI) reveal an average of 8 Black students per school and 2 students per graduating class.[9] Although it has been shown that the number of Black students has been stagnant at 5% for the past 11 years,[10] at the macro-scale, trends show an increase in diversity in schools. The profession has yet to show the same growth. To put these numbers in context,[11] in 2020 there were:

- 1,350 Black men practicing architecture
- 691 Black women practicing architecture
- 2,060 Black individuals practicing architecture (accounts for those who did not disclose their gender, selected other, or unknown)

- 47,951 white men practicing architecture
- 14,260 white women practicing architecture

The on-the-ground reality of these figures creates an anxiety-provoking environment in which many underrepresented students are left feeling vulnerable. Brandon Battle, who received top grades in ArcPrep, shared his thoughts on his first day of architecture school at the University of Michigan:

> "I think my experience during my first university architecture course was probably a shared experience amongst many students in majors where your work is directly compared. I felt a bit outclassed. When our seminar began and my peers' portfolios were pulled up on the projector, I was in awe at the quality of work that the students already had. Feeling inadequate is definitely a problem that is not easy to overcome. I don't think I'm a great student and I'm always worried with what my future is going to be like once I'm out of college."[12]

Discussions with my former students often hinged on feelings of (dis)comfort and, moreover, how mechanisms of support might provide comfort, balance, and joy in their creative work in ways that would allow them to excel. Four years after graduating from ArcPrep, Aonor prepares for her next steps after graduation. She says, "Something I've been thinking about lately is comfort–I know I would be more comfortable in a Black firm, a Black environment, but that's not reality, and choosing to graduate from a PWI rather than a HBCU has prepared me for that reality." As Aonor's journey unfolds, her experience as a minority in the academy of architecture has not engendered a sense of comfort working in a predominantly white environment. Rather, it has left her (devastatingly) resigned to a perpetual state of discomfort in a future professional environment that she acknowledges may also be predominantly white.

6 From interview with Aonor Washington.

7 NAAB. "2020 NAAB Annual Report on Architecture Education." Accessed March 3, 2022. www.naab.org/wp-content/uploads/2020_NAAB_MSI_Report.pdf

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 American Institute of Architects. "Membership Demographics Report 2020." Accessed March 3, 2022. https://content.aia.org/sites/default/files/2021-11/2020_Membership_Demographics_Report.pdf

12 From interview with Brandon Battle.

As initiatives aimed at amplifying diversity in architecture continue to grow, it seems an appropriate moment to take stock and forecast opportunities for how the field (both in academia and the profession) may continue to encourage inclusion. Among the most significant issues is the lack of continuity that exists between programs aimed at increasing diversity and the students' future endeavors. In other words, despite their intentions, these initiatives frequently do not provide sufficient opportunities for students to stitch experiences and develop a cohesive trajectory leading to licensure and practice. When the guidance that might facilitate such linkages is absent, broader scales of mentorship could assist in providing needed continuity.[13]

Providing meaningful mentorship, though, might require fundamental reconsiderations of institutional stewardship networks. These types of networks do exist presently but at a local scale or across a limited series of institutions,[14] and in these cases, their reach is limited. Instead, amplification of these institutional networks could provide a broader support system for underrepresented students interested in pursuing the discipline. Two possible frameworks emerge for how to consider institutional stewardship.

1) A vertical network that connects academia with the profession on a large scale. Currently, models such as ArcPrep's awarded internships construct a relationship that stitches high school to practice. While this has been impactful for students such as Brandon, it is a competitive position reserved for the top few. Harvard's Black In Design links all participating students with practicing mentors from Perkins&Will and graduate student mentors from GSD, thus, forging a circle of exchange between the three, and altering the more typical synergy between mentor and mentee.

Sustaining and amplifying links such as these between

academia and practice also have models that might propel a broader cultural transformation in the discipline. Cooperative education–in which students alternate between academic semesters and those working in the profession–is one such effort, but is limited to emphasizing conventional pathways to the practice of architecture. Perhaps a more fitting mentorship model would be following the medical residency in which medical school graduates hold residencies in hospitals or clinics; a period of time that is both apart from an academic environment and consists of educational training under the guidance of a senior physician. In effect, the residency blurs education and profession within a mentor-mentee environment between the attending physician (senior) and resident (junior). The difference between these models and current practices would transform idiosyncratic links between academic institutions and professional practices into routine mentorship and training methodologies; thus embedding the notion of mentorship, in fundamental and far-reaching ways, within the discipline of architecture.

2) Alternative to the above *vertical* mentorship opportunities between academia and practice, an equally broad-scale and *horizontal* cross-institutional network model might exist *between* academies (and possibly between disciplines or departments). To think *between* would accommodate the range of capabilities of students that participate in preparatory programs and enable a rethinking of the goals of early-learning programs. To work between institutions would be to offer outlets and pathways that extend beyond the "host" preparatory program (often a top tier, elite school) and link up with other academies at a range of tier levels.

A common ethos of architecture preparatory programs is that they are a gateway to a multitude of related professions. These programs measure success not by

13 Broader scale mentorship ideas can be drawn from existing models including Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Near-Peer Mentoring: Lauren and John Arnold Foundation. "Social Programs That Work Review: Evidence Summary for Big Brothers Big Sisters." Social Programs That Work (November 2017): 1–3. And, Trujillo G, Aguinaldo PG, Anderson C, et al. "Near-peer STEM Mentoring Offers Unexpected Benefits for Mentors from Traditionally Underrepresented Backgrounds." Perspect Undergrad Res Mentor. (2015).

14 Existing networks include, for example, ArcPrep–Michigan, Cornell PSP, ArcPrep internships in Detroit firms.

admittance into elite architecture schools but instead aim to expose students to thinking critically about the built-environment with the anticipation that doing so can open up interests in a host of related fields (such as design, engineering, law, or public policy). These intentions are admirable and do a great amount of good. But the interests cultivated in preparatory programs deserve (and require) continued support beyond the semester of architectural introduction. Sustained efforts to support and track students following prep courses could assist in placing them in schools existing in a variety of tier-levels and facilitate connections with other disciplines. A suitable analogical model from other disciplines is hard to come by, but the ethos of working together across institutions for the common good is in the spirit of the preparatory programs' aims, and helps to evaluate whether architecture is the right fit for a given student. Simply put, if institutions that host preparatory programs would provide pathways to other institutions, even those with whom they are in competition or at different tier levels, a number of bridging opportunities could arise.

Since Sutton's book launch in 2017, the parallels to the events that spawned the 1968 campus rebellions have only increased, and the number of Black Americans in the profession has remained relatively unchanged. Preparatory programs are extremely successful in exposing students to the discipline of architecture, but without structural change in our institutions, these programs are destined to create little change. Additional support through mentorship and cross-institutional networks would amplify their effects and provide a broader-scope pathway for underrepresented groups to enter into the discipline and feel greater comfort in doing so. Along with structural changes, as the current NOMA president, Jason Pugh, says, we need to consider "milestones" throughout the journey.[15] Large-scale change will rely on the accumulation of several

smaller scale initiations that most importantly provide continuity and extended support for longer than a singular introductory course can offer. As universities seek methods of increasing diversity, it will become necessary to expand beyond current investments in recruitment and move toward building expanded support networks. These advancements toward continuities of support would suggest a new model of collective stewardship and, moreover, they would leverage the capacity of institutions to instill an ethos from which all scales of support can grow.

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15 NOMA. "Baseline on Belonging: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Architecture Licensing." Accessed March 3, 2022. https://www.noma.net/research/