Notes from Pre-Doctoral Workshop for Students of Color, July, 2013
USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning

Panel: Faculty of color share their experiences and insights. Presented by Professors Rigo Rodriguez, Hilda Blanco, Raphael Bostic, Dan Rodriguez, Catherine Ross, and Lois Takahashi.

The panelists discussed motivations for pursuing a Ph.D., research areas, and key challenges of being a professor and working the field of planning. Advice covered research topics, mentoring, and academic preparation.

Research advice:

- **Allow the data to guide the research question.** Sometimes your ideal research question may not have data. Other times, the ideal data may not completely relate to your research question. It is perfectly fine to allow the data to mold your research—the data will sometimes make it a slightly smoother dissertation to write.
- **Decide on how many jobs you want.** Some will want to be practitioners and academics. It is hard work to keep up with two jobs. Make sure your university and department allow you to do both, if that is your choice. At many universities, the tenure process focuses on publications, so be aware that serving the community, while vital, will not be weighed as heavily as peer reviewed publications during the tenure process.

The importance of mentoring:

- **Mentors are vital to your success in a Ph.D. program.** Having someone on your team to discuss your issues, your research, and connect you to resources is vital. They are the backbone of your faculty support.
- **Find support from your peers:** Equally important is a community of support. Also, talk to other students because it is likely they are feeling as nervous and stressed as you are.
- **Take care of yourself.** Create a space away from work to restore your mind, body, and soul.
- **Make personal connections.** With mentors and other great resources, it is necessary to establish personal relationships. Continue to nurture them on an ongoing basis—whether it’s a research meeting or in the hallway.

Academics

- **The typical path and qualifications: 5 years of Ph.D. and 5 years until tenure.** The coursework will take a year or two, qualifying exams will occur after coursework, gathering the data will take a year or so, and writing the dissertation will be the rest. Once hired, it is important to constantly work toward tenure and to put yourself in a position to go up for tenure by the 5th year. Aim to publish twice a year in respected journals during the assistant professor phase.
- **Explore other fields as they relate to planning.** Sometimes inspiration will come from engineering, economics, philosophy, anthropology, psychology, etc. Knowledge of these fields will give you a nuanced perspective on planning—this is sometimes the way to frame your research question.
- **Know who you are and what gives you joy.** There will be unknown opportunities and different paths to academia. A career in academia requires a passion for research and your research topics. Also, keep in mind that your research interest may evolve and change dramatically over
the years as you continue to answer the “unanswered questions” at the end of one research paper.

- **Have an inner voice.** You know what is interesting and what is quality work. Don’t give up; don’t allow others to break you down. You must make yourself bulletproof. It is also necessary to ensure that you are being held to the same standard as others.

- **Be prepared.** When presenting, teaching, or writing a paper—prepare yourself. Manufacture opportunities for you to mess up where it doesn’t count (e.g. practice talks in front of friends); be over-prepared. Learn to take substantive critique seriously, but not personally. It will make your work better. **Know the balance between community-driven work and academic research.** People (of color, in particular) come into the academy wanting to do community-driven work. However, there can be fewer chances of publishing this work. In the early stages of your career, academic research and publications should be the focus. Academic publications, in highly regarded journals or from highly regarded publishers, are important. Publications can be the difference in tenure review. **Time management: Buy out your courses.** There are ways to reduce the teaching requirements if you obtain grants to help pay for your own salary. You are essentially ‘buying back’ your time from the university. This will allow more time for research.

- **Demonstrate your expertise.** Always produce high level products in your area of interest. Do the extra work (writing articles, blogs, journals, etc.) to make a name for yourself.

**Research Presentation & Panel:** Professor Manuel Pastor presented research on models of community-engaged research. The discussion and questions revolved around the compatibility of social justice issues and Ph.D. research.

- **Rigor. Relevance. Reach.** You must be able to explain things so that people understand you. Your work must make an impact on the field of planning and communities. The work must be high-quality to be accepted in academia. You should be able to write a journal article and an op-ed based on your community-engaged research.

- **Find research programs, not projects.** Research programs allow you to look at a set of issues rather than just a single question. This way, the work will continue to build upon itself for sustained longevity.

- **Be compatible on all fronts.** His research group, the Program for Environmental and Regional Equity (PERE), communicates their results in multiple ways. They aim to produce a report for a meeting of the scientific community, write an op-ed in a newspaper, issue a press release, and author an academic paper from each project, as an illustration of communicating in multiple modes to varied audiences.

- **Be a part of a research center.** Research centers provide the hands-on experience needed for the dissertation phase of a Ph.D. The senior colleagues may have more time and flexibility in terms of community-based work, and can be good resources for younger faculty and Ph.D. students.

- **Be intellectually curious.** Part of being a scholar is individual curiosity. You have to be willing to stand up for your ideas.

- **Community-based research takes time.** The process of working with communities and building credible relationships takes time (more time than a Ph.D. dissertation generally allows). It is important to know when to pursue this type of research in your career as it requires resources, trust, and time.

- **Components of the Job:** Flexibility, round-the-clock hours, and resources. It is important to be able to write grants, obtain grants, and secure them for the long-term. You must be entrepreneurial in that sense.
• *Seeking tenure requires an analysis of audiences.* There is an internal audience of your colleagues and department and an external audience that is the larger academic community. Be an ambassador for your work to multiple and varied audiences in order to make the tenure process easier on yourself. You will be evaluated on ability to bring in grants, publications, and contribution to the field.

• *Publications, Grant Writing, and Skills:* You will learn them as you go. Grant writing should begin year 1 of assistant professorship. Pursue senior faculty for assistance on the processes and skills needed. Should an opportunity arise to publish during your Ph.D. study—take it! In terms of skills, learn how to write and think critically. During your Ph.D. coursework, acquire a set of methods that are used in the journals you like. Analyze what skills you will need and take the time to learn methods, research design, quantitative, and qualitative skills.

*Admissions and Self-Statements:* Marisol Gonzalez, director of graduate admissions at USC Price, shared some tips on the application process and self-statement.

• Do your research on the faculty because fit (between you and the faculty’s research) is vital for the Ph.D.
• Meet faculty members prior to application, and definitely before deciding where to attend.
• Mention your future plans after the Ph.D. in your application essay.
• Also in the application essay, do the following:
  o Make your research interests clear.
  o Your cover letter is a chance to explain any negatives – grades, gaps in schooling, a change of careers. Don’t apologize, but do explain who you are and the path you have followed.
  o The self-statement should have a strong (not cliché) opening with personal experience discussed throughout.
  o Format the essay properly (and as directed).
  o Address the questions asked and follow the application rules.
  o Sell yourself by setting yourself apart.
  o Mention the faculty members you want to work with—that person (persons) will usually be forwarded the application. It is important to have some sort of a personal connection or prior meeting with that person in order for them to gauge the potential for working together.
  o Talk about your relevant coursework, skills, employment, and fit.
• Talk to current students for their perspective on faculty and the program.
• Be polished and confident.
• Key points of evaluation: intellectual curiosity, tenacity, GRE, grades (undergraduate and graduate), self-statement.

*Recent Ph.D. graduates Panel,* presented by Professors Anna Kim and Sylvia Nam and advanced doctoral student Carolina Sarmiento: A discussion with recent Ph.D. graduates led to fresh perspectives on the process, obstacles, and benefits of pursuing a Ph.D.

• *There will be judgments based on why your project matters that may be confused with defending why you matter.* When doing research on populations you relate to or populations that are completely opposite of you, there will be questions of whether you have authority based on your personal background. There will be questions of authenticity, but you must transform these paradigms and develop a thick skin.
• Cross pollinating departments may help provide resources for pursuing cultural/identity topics in planning. There is access to qualitative researchers in other departments that study cultural/identity issues—pull those resources onto your committee.

• You’re going to pave your own road. The Ph.D. structural support leaves after the first couple of years in the program. You’re going to be on your own in terms of figuring out your methods and writing your dissertation. It’s important to keep a plan for finishing your dissertation, even with the obstacles that may arise for students of color.

• Link classes and readings to qualifying exams and dissertation research. Make sure you take great notes throughout your courses—especially methodology courses and topic-related courses. Do an annotated bibliography for readings you find relevant or interesting.

• If you can co-author with an advisor, do it. It will help you in the job-hunting process to have publications under your belt—even co-authored ones. It is competitive, but you need to put yourself out there. If they ask you to revise and resubmit, then you’re likely going to get published.

Panel, presented by Professors Basolo, Ross, Blanco, Sloane: The panel focused on questions not previously answered—the burden on students to diversify academia, the structure of the Ph.D. process, and teaching.

• Diversity matters. It may not be an easy process for students of color, but the academy needs diversity to achieve excellence. It’s everyone’s job to help increase diversity—not just the burden of students of color.

• Get a good guide. It’s important to look at other examples of good dissertations in order to understand the structure and components of a dissertation. Make a plan for your dissertation using the advice and guides you have collected.

• Stay committed. Sometimes you’ll have to take time off for a variety of reasons, but make sure you come back as soon as possible.

• Emulate the teachers you’ve loved. You have to like teaching to begin with—if not, the academy will be difficult. Some universities dedicate resources to help you improve your teaching methods and public speaking. Become a Teaching Assistant and ask to lead one lecture. Watch other professors teach.

• Balance teaching and research. You won’t keep your job on the sole basis of great teaching reviews, but you will keep your job on the basis of great research and publications (at a Research-1 university). If you’re primarily interested in teaching, don’t take a job at an R1 university (generally the higher ranked, research intensive universities). However, if you’re dedicated to both research and teaching, there’s nothing wrong with being great at both!

Panel, Nuts and Bolts of applying to and choosing a Ph.D. program, presented by Professors Bertelli, Schweitzer, Bostic, and Lewis

• Use your courses as an investment. Choose courses strategically as they will help provide you develop the tools you need to write a dissertation. Make sure you analyze the required courses prior to choosing a program.

• The admissions committee is looking for people who want to be professors and researchers. You need to convey an understanding of research questions, match with potential faculty mentors, and look to see if your faculty is at your dream school. They’re looking for your potential to grow into a scholar.

• Go to a school that matches you. Whether it is based on teaching, researching, or practicing, choose the school that fits your goals.
• *Don’t come off as non-committal.* You have to project your interests—You may not know exactly what you want to do, but show in the application that you are committed to teaching and researching. Convince an admissions committee to expend limited resources on you and help the admissions committee understand your potential as a scholar.

• *Some classes are worth taking again.* Take research design or methods classes over again, if necessary. It is enlightening. No two classes are the same!

• *Where your program is housed may make a difference.* Look at the nuances between being in an architecture school versus a policy school. There are differences, and you need to figure out what those are.

• *Take ownership of the fact that your top choice isn’t always going to be your champion.* You have to find the people who will call on your behalf, who have a solid record of promoting people, and a solid record of producing quality research.

• *Be a producer of knowledge.* Convey the fact that you can transition from being a consumer of knowledge to being a producer of knowledge.

• **Additional advice:**
  
  o *Get letters of recommendation from credible sources.*
  o *There is no expectation that you will have published before entering a Ph.D. program.*
    
    - *When looking for jobs after the Ph.D. program, having publications helps.*
  o *Don’t be cute in your admission self-statement.*
  o *GREs still matter, as do undergraduate grades.*
  o *Network, network, network.*