

The Workforce Inclusion and Equity Project Report of the Department of Planning

The purpose of this research is to provide guidance on how the Baltimore City Department of Planning (DOP) can diversify its staff makeup to be more representative of the Baltimore demography. According to the 2018 American Community Survey data, 30.4% of Baltimoreans identify as White/Caucasian, while 61.7% identify as Black/African American. From this data, there is no doubt about who the majority population is in Baltimore city. However, as of March 2020, 69% of the staff at the DOP identify as White/Caucasian, while 21% identify as Black/African American. Recent and historical studies have shown over time the lack of even representation that occurs in the planning field amongst White, Black, Asian, and Hispanic. In a 2018 Planners Salary Survey that was designed by the American Planning Association (APA), out of the 6,770 full-time respondents, who were year-round planners, only 4% identify as Black/African American, 4% identify as Asian, and 5% identify as Hispanic. Although this huge gap difference has a lot to do with the history of planning in the United States, it is time that the department actively and consciously begins to replace hiring barriers that may currently exist with more equitable practices. Apart from promoting greater representation in the city government, employment in the public sector has proven to be instrumental in the financial liberation of historically disadvantaged groups. In a 2011 study by Stephen Pitts at the UC Berkeley Labor Center, the public sector is the single most important source of employment for African Americans. Todd Gardner also noted in an Urban Institute study that one route to upward social mobility has historically been "employment in local government." An additional goal of this project is to make sure that more people of color are reflected in leadership positions. Currently, 85% of senior staff at the department identify as White.

Methodology

The Workforce Inclusion and Equity study explored several research methods such as in-depth interviews, literature review, focus groups, and surveys to be able to identify hiring and retention barriers that presently exist in the department and to also look for ways to resolve these concerns. Participants in this study included 78 young professionals and recent graduates in Planning/closely related field, four former DOP employees, current staff focus groups (with non-managerial staff), the equity committee, the managerial team, Human Resources, Morgan State University City and Regional Planning Director, and 9 City Planning Directors from Washington DC, Philadelphia, Boston, Seattle, Houston, Portland, Denver, El Paso, and Milwaukee. The questions and discussion held in each session focused heavily on what the DOP could be doing differently concerning our hiring, retention, and promotion practices.

Literature Review

In this study, "diversity" refers to when Black and Brown individuals can be in positions of power and reflect a percentage of their workforce that relates to the demographics of the community. "Workforce inclusion" is an equitable distribution of influence to women, people of color, and other underrepresented communities employed throughout the workplace - from top-down. Throughout this report, the term "people of color" will be used to refer to underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in the planning field. Terminologies such as "list of employment," "uniform equivalence," and "first cut," are specific to Baltimore City Human Resources. A list of

employment, also known as the eligible list, comprises of all qualified candidates who have passed an examination and are ranked in order of relative excellence. The top percentages of eligible candidates are referred to the hiring manager for consideration first. The remaining applications are held until the hiring manager needs additional referrals. Uniform equivalence is the minimum education and experience required by all city agencies for the same type of positions. These standards are set by the Class and Comp division of Central HR, and it can only be changed if all participating agencies reach a consensus to do so. The first HR cut is the disqualification of applicants who do not meet the minimum requirements. These first cut for some positions, especially in a department like planning, can be tricky.

Several studies have shown diversity and inclusion in the workplace to increase productivity and overall employee engagement. Even more importantly, diversity in the planning profession is essential not only because the planning field has required it for so long, but because it allows for the even representation and advocacy of all stakeholders. Elizabeth Foma in her research on the impact of workplace diversity noted that “a sense of harmony is recreated when a company recognizes and accommodates the differences within its diverse workforce.”

There are several reasons why the planning department of many cities in the United States is predominately white. According to a 2016 Planning thesis by Giovania Tiarachristie, all of the following factors contribute to the lack of diversity in the planning industry “1) inequitable communities, 2) lack of social capital and exposure to the profession, 3) lack of diversity in planning schools, 4) unequal opportunities to building professional experience, and 5) unconscious bias in the hiring process.” It is important to acknowledge that these existing barriers make up the bigger picture of what we see in almost all planning department. This is why tackling the root cause of the lack of diversity in planning will solve the problem more efficiently than other strategies.

The issue of exposure to the planning field is a major factor. Many people do not know about the planning field until their undergraduate’ studies or later in their careers. This lack of exposure is detrimental because it reduces the chances for an easy trial and error that other career paths allow. According to a city planner Pete Sullivan in his blog post to advise future planners, he said, “exposure to our profession tends to lag behind other popular careers, and so it is wise to see if planning is a good fit while there’s still time to consider early career paths.”

Methodology/Process

Staff Focus Groups

A staff focus group was put together during the 2020 Q3 Equity Committee meeting. To ensure a productive conversation, participants were broken up into four smaller workshops after the Equity Fellow gave an overview presentation and the goal for the focus groups. Each group comprised of five people, including the facilitators. Every group had the same question prompt to guarantee consistency so that when all the groups merged for a larger discussion, everyone was on the same page. Managerial staff was not included in this group; instead, they participated in separate one-on-one interviews. The plan also was to hear from non-managerial staff without the involvement of managers. The questions that were discussed in each focus group centered around 1) the culture

at the department and what sets it apart from other workplaces that staff may have encountered, and 2) the contributions of leaders in the quest of diversifying the workforce, and 3) what staff thought the major barriers to recruitment and retention of Baltimoreans planners of color, and 4) what the DOP can do internally to accomplish our Workforce Inclusion and Equity goals.

In-Depth Interview (Management)

The one-on-one interview session with managers and the department's director focused primarily on past practices and the next steps. The interviews for leadership focused on 1) their professional background including how they got exposed to the planning field, 2) strategies that they have employed to further equity-related initiatives within their particular work or team, 3) their experience with recruitment of native Baltimoreans and planners of color, 4) internal promotion barriers, and 5) the culture of the DOP. The shortest interview ran for thirty minutes, while the longest interview session went on for about one hour and thirty minutes. A few conversations were recorded with the permission of the interviewees, but I took notes on responses and major themes for all participants. It is also crucial to note that leadership at the DOP is committed to diversifying the workforce population and also making sure that people of color are fairly represented at senior level positions. It was for this purpose that an Equity Fellow was initially hired to help research strategies that will aid the process.

Former Staff Feedback

Although the former employees who responded to this study were few in number, they had some helpful feedback for the organization. Participation in this study was voluntary for past employees who separated from DOP over the past two years, and anyone who had pending litigation with the City of Baltimore was advised against engaging in the survey. One respondent was with the department for more than five years, another respondent was with the department for more than three years but less than five years while the last two respondents were with the department for less than a year. All four respondents indicated to have pursued employment with the local government after leaving the DOP.

The survey prompts for past employees focused primarily on 1) why they chose to work at the DOP, 2) why they left, 3) what they loved working for the DOP, 4) the changes they wished had happened while they were still with the department, and 5) the effect of diversity on their work.

Young Professionals/Recent Graduates Survey

The survey for young professionals and recent graduates prioritized targeting Baltimoreans and minorities in the field because this was essential to revealing hiring barriers that are contributing to the lack of diversity in our workforce. Compared to how homogenous (white) the country's planning field is, our survey got an overwhelming response from people of color. 53.85% of our survey respondents identify as White or Caucasian, 30.77% identify as Black or African American, 7.69% identify as Hispanic or Latino, 3.85% identify as Asian or Asian American, and 3.85% identify as Another race. For the report on respondents' educational background, 29.49% has a BA/College degree, 58.97% has a Master's in City or Urban Planning (or related field), 8.97% has a professional Degree (JD, MSW, other), and 2.56% has other degrees. The survey gathered qualitative data through multiple-choice and open-ended questions, inquiring to the influence of

diversity and inclusion at the workplace, what makes a job position or company attractive or unpleasant, and additional comments or feedback about working for government agencies.

Diversity and inclusion at the workplace were the underlying themes of the survey, and a significant percentage of participants identified both elements as a compelling factor when applying for a job position at any organization. Other top factors include organization mission, culture, stability, the opportunity for upward movement, and professional development.

In answering the question of how government agencies can improve their recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies, one participant described their views below:

“I find that government organizations barrier to entry is high and highly specific which is weird being that planning is an interdisciplinary field that benefits from various backgrounds and experience, yet the requirements asked for positions do not mirror that. Also, some students such as myself were not afforded the ability to intern during grad school because I needed to work to support myself, a consideration that isn't taken into consideration when qualifiers ask for a minimum three years planning experience beyond the degree and overlooks previous experience that is planning oriented. These barriers make it difficult for recent graduates to apply for these opportunities.”

Other key points that were raised by participants regarding how to improve recruitment and retention practices in government agencies include shortening the long wait period, making salaries competitive, increasing job posting coverage beyond jurisdiction, keeping applicants apprised of application status, having diversity in management and upper-level positions, entertaining the willingness to train recent graduates and creating opportunities for students on OPT visas.

Planning Director Survey

Planning directors from other cities were also reached for this research. The goal was to find out best practices in other cities that could be adopted by the DOP. In a survey that was responded to by nine city planning directors, $\frac{3}{4}$ indicated that their agency staff demographics (race and gender) do not match the demographics of their cities. Additionally, six out of the nine directors indicated that a master's degree is not required for an entry-level planning position in their agency. When asked to explain the reasoning behind their answer, many of the directors who said a master's degree was not required for an entry-level position at their agency mentioned that it was either an opportunity to widen their applicant pool or in compliance with civil service regulations.

To answer the question prompt of how directors have prioritized the creation of a diverse and inclusive team, one of the directors stated:

“It is part of the department's and the city's mission to increase workforce diversity. Managers are required and encouraged to create a diverse and inclusive team at every hiring opportunity. Any staff participating in hiring interviews is required to take advanced training in interview biases to remove barriers to inclusive hiring. Managers are encouraged and incentivized to advance

inclusion and staff diversification and are included in performance reviews. We also track and report on an annual basis performance-related advancing a diverse staff not only in demographics but also on pay equity. In each of the last four years, staff diversity and pay equity have improved.”

Judging from the information that was gathered from the survey of directors, it is obvious that a significant percentage of city planning divisions are not only bothered by the lack of diversity in the field but also working towards addressing the issues. Some of the strategies that these cities have adopted over the years to improve the recruitment and retention of people of color in their workforce have proven to be effective. To ensure diverse recruitment, directors highlighted tactics like administering staff training, reviewing minimum qualifications on job postings, and hiring a recruiter focused specifically on marketing open positions with communities of color to have helped their hiring process. While in terms of retention, directors mentioned the creation of employee resource groups, paid certificates/licenses for staff, a compressed work schedule, opportunities to attend national conferences, and reimbursement for the AICP exam to boost the retention rate of employees.

Conclusion

There are some immediate term solutions that the DOP can carry out internally to tackle the lack of diversity and workforce inclusion barriers that currently exist. However, some other steps need a consensus and cooperation with central HR. It is essential to note that the DOP is unique in many ways when compared to other city agencies. The DOP is one of the smallest departments in the City comprising of less than 70 employees. The turnover rate is also relatively low compared to many other agencies in the city. The DOP staff makeup is highly professional, and the average retention timeframe for an employee in this department ranges from 10-15 years, excluding contractual positions. With the distinctive patterns that currently exist at the DOP, it is unavoidable for some of central HR and city government policies to be detrimental to the department's push for equitable and inclusive hiring practices. While some of DHR practices such as "list of employment," "uniform equivalencies with other agencies" and "early disqualifications/first cut" may have good intentions and are necessary to avoid unfair practices in some other agencies, they have unintended consequences at the DOP. These practices have also proven to slow down the progress of diversifying the department. This is why the recommendations below will address to all relevant parties that have an influence over the hiring and retention practices at the DOP.

Recommendations

After a rigorous research process, I propose the following set of recommendations to better recruit, retain, and enable growth and leadership for people of color in the Baltimore City Department of Planning. These recommendations will be classified between all responsible parties since all the steps that need to be taken do not apply to the DOP exclusively. (Please note, recommendations that should be prioritized are in bold)

For the Department of Planning (Entire Staff)

The following recommendations are for the entire staff of the Department of Planning to include contractual employees, interns, and fellows.

1. **The entire DOP team should set minimum goals for new hires demographics. For instance, the goal might be to see 60% of all new hires from 2020-2025 to be people of color. This goal statement can also include how many Baltimoreans should be hired and people of color in leadership.**
 - **For accountability, the department should designate a body to track progress and compliance of goals set. The report can be done quarterly or twice a year.**

2. Equity/Diversity/Inclusion training should be promoted, and staff should be encouraged to attend four times a year. Each quarterly training should be followed by a post-training reflection/survey.
 - **Already available training such as "Diversity on the job," "Building, Rebuilding, and Sustaining Trust," "Skills for Effective Collaboration," "Outwitting Your Cognitive Bias," "Unconscious Bias," "Perseverance at Work," "Equity, Diversity & Inclusion," and "Facing the Management Challenges of Difficult Behavior and Diverse Teams," should be made compulsory for every staff.**
 - More training should be carried out to help educate staff not only about the City of Baltimore but also about the history of planning in the United States as a whole.

For the Department of Planning (Hiring Managers/Team Lead)

1. Each division lead should organize frequent staff training on the need for equity in the city government. This can be in the form of a monthly Lunch & Learn depending on the available time and resources.

2. **Each division lead should create at least one internship position for a student per academic semester. This could be a for-credit internship and should be heavily publicized in Baltimore city HBCUs, and other platforms accessible to underrepresented students.**
 - **Every division should collaborate more robustly in advertising internship positions.**

3. **Each hiring manager in agreement with leadership should design an equity/diversity/inclusion statement that will be reflected in the future job postings and organization website to introduce applicants to the department's commitment to an equitable hiring practice.**

4. **Hiring managers should develop a training program for staff on the interview panel. Hiring managers should also make sure that the interview panel is diverse in race, gender, and age.**

5. Hiring managers with the help of the department HR should continually evaluate the effectiveness of the different assessment strategies to promote and protect the quality and integrity of the hiring process.
6. The use of “stay interviews” should be adopted for tracking employee satisfaction which in turn influences retention rate. The goal of stay interviews is to identify how to keep a valued employee from leaving the team or department.

For the Department of Planning (Leadership)

The following recommendations are actions that leadership can initiate at the department to aid diversity and inclusion, equitable hiring practice, and the retention of people of color.

1. **The DOP should establish a good and lasting relationship with Morgan State University, an HBCU.**
 - A paid diversity fellowship should be designed to attract African American and other underrepresented students to the department.
 - This new partnership should ensure a seamless career and employment path for students in fields applicable to the DOP.
 - Paid and for-credit internships with Morgan State seniors (undergraduate) and graduate students.
 - One-on-one mentorship program with Morgan State graduating students.
 - A close relationship with Morgan State Career and Internship Center. Internships and job opportunities should be posted on MSU job websites for student’s access.
 - There should be an annual on-site awareness event/seminar for students who know little about planning to introduce them to the field.
2. **Leadership should permit and encourage the involvement of a broader range of staff in the recruitment process of senior-level positions. The selected group which we can call the “search committee” will be in charge of conducting a comprehensive and inclusive review of applicant materials.**
 - This should include access to the job posting medium to ensure that these senior-level positions are getting the required coverage and applicant reach needed.
 - This should also include resume review and overall active participation in the hiring process.
3. Apart from the proposed partnership with MSU, leadership should create other paths that bring African Americans and other underrepresented groups to the planning field. This can be in the form of community engagement/outreach.

- A one-day shadow program can be designed for interested high schoolers and community college students. The same way a high school senior is privileged to shadow doctors, students from underserved communities should be able to shadow a planner.
4. **Leadership should push for the creation of new entry-level positions. These positions will create opportunities for recent graduates and young professionals with little to no experience in the planning field.**
 - Positions like city planner training positions/ planning assistants can be brought back to the department. These positions will also create opportunities for more upward movement in the department.
 - A Bachelor's degree should be the base requirement and it should not be limited to a bachelor's in planning.
 5. **Leadership should work with internal HR, DHR and other city agencies to revise some of the job requirements for positions like City Planner I to allow for a larger and more diverse pool of applicants.**
 6. Leadership should lobby for the addition of an annual equity-based training fee for the whole department into the budget. A good base allocation to consider is \$10,000 per year.
 - **The Office of Equity and Civil Rights should also be added to the conversations on training.**
 7. **Leadership should provide DHR with insight into the uniqueness of the department so that some of DHR hiring practices can be tailored to aid diversity rather than hinder it.**

For the Baltimore City Department of Human Resources (DHR)

The following recommendations are for the Baltimore City Department of Human Resources to consider. Although the DHR is doing an exemplary job of overseeing hiring practices in the city government to ensure fairness and reduce the workload on agencies, the uniqueness of a few agencies such as the DOP must be taken into consideration when some rules are established. DHR should work with individual agencies to consult what may/may not be working for them. Some of DHR's practices are currently hindering the DOP's effort on equity and workforce inclusiveness.

1. The DHR if possible, should 'modify' the use of "list of employment" for the DOP. The list of employment which has its benefit for the DHR is not allowing for an equitable hiring practice at the DOP.
2. **The DHR should permit the use of strong affirmative statements in job postings for the DOP. This should not equal 'discrimination' or 'favoritism' instead it proves the government's commitment to ensuring a diverse and inclusive workforce.**

3. To ensure that the DOP is also attracting Baltimoreans, DHR should adopt a point system where planners from Baltimore or Baltimore based community organizations get additional boost points.

Next Steps

In my opinion, these are some of the next steps that the DOP should carry out within the next few weeks.

- The DOP should start a well-defined internship committee.
- The DOP should meet with DHR, the Mayor's Office and the Office of Equity and Civil Rights to discuss this research report and recommendations.
- Staff should start registering to take some of the available free training on equity, workforce inclusion, and diversity.
- The department should carry out a close analysis of a sample position and all the candidates that applied to better understand the demographics of applicants.
- Staff should set diversity and workforce inclusion goals with timeframes.
- "Stay interviews" should be conducted for all employees to find any more retention loopholes that may exist.
- Partnership conversations with Morgan State University should be expanded.
- The "Search Committee" for senior-level positions and the "Diversity Compliance Committee" for tracking goal statement should be established.

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