INCLUSIVE EXCELLENCE: ACHIEVING DIVERSITY AT MIT SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING

BY DR. ROBBIN N. CHAPMAN, MANAGER OF DIVERSITY RECRUITMENT, MIT SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING

A unifying thread common to all disciplines in our school - a belief in the power of design. As architects, we know our designs are strengthened and improved when considered from multiple perspectives. Adèle Naudé Santos

When Dean Adèle Naudé Santos shares her vision for the MIT School of Architecture and Planning (SA+P), she emphasizes diversity as a critical element in maintaining excellence in the field of architecture, both in practice and the academy. At SA+P, we recognize the value of including diverse perspectives, approaches, and backgrounds in our work as architects and designers. While our school is diverse in academic domains and research styles, we lack diversity within our student and faculty body. However, such equitable representation is crucial if we are to remain competitive and innovative.

First, let us define what we mean by diversity. Diversity is a characteristic of a group or aggregate. More specifically, it is a measure of the variance along dimensions of that group. For our purposes, these dimensions include but are not limited to race and gender. Unfortunately, achieving such diversity is often viewed as compromising quality, lowering standards, and sacrificing meritocracy. This view is prevalent in academia, including schools of architecture, and often carries over into the profession, as well. At SA+P, we equate diversity with inclusive excellence. Inclusive speaks to the equitable representation of all the varying perspectives, approaches, and peoples within our school. Excellence speaks to the extraordinary talents of all members of our community and to the abandonment of archaic, demeaning views of diverse perspectives, backgrounds, and peoples.

Designing Inclusive Excellence

The work of increasing diversity and inclusive excellence is challenging for very human reasons; old and trusted habits die hard. Then, how are we to increase the numbers of underrepresented architecture students and faculty, and subsequently, diversity within the profession? At SA+P, our approach involves enculturation of inclusive excellence practices and values as part of our diversity recruitment efforts. Our ongoing diversity initiative is organized around five core principles: diversity brand development, student engagement/recruitment, faculty engagement/recruit-ment, inclusion/retention, and leadership/coordination. These core principles provide a framework for supporting a shared vision of inclusive excellence, the enculturation of inclusive recruitment and retention practices, and accountability mechanisms for diversity recruitment. (For detailed information about SA+P diversity programs or the five core principles, please contact the author). The following is a sampling of activities associated with each of the core principles:

- Diversity brand development is an important part of creating a shared vision of diversity within SA+P. Our goal is to be seen and experienced, internally and externally, as actively moving toward inclusive excellence. Some activities include establishing an active presence at affinity conferences, on social and professional networking web sites, and within underrepresented communities.

- Student Recruitment/Engagement involves engaging with underrepresented talent by attending recruitment events and working with affinity student groups, both at MIT and nationally. We partner with affinity organizations and schools to identify talent early on. We establish relationships with students, from grade school and upward, and introduce them to design and architecture. We provide opportunities for prospective student to engage with our faculty, students, and staff.

- Faculty Recruitment/Engagement includes brokering connections between underrepresented talent and our faculty, and supporting search committees in their evaluation of diverse talent from unfamiliar schools and programs. Faculty leadership opportunities include faculty using personal and professional networks to identify talent and learning about best practices for minimizing unconscious bias during the search process.

- Inclusion/Retention activities are opportunities for our community to increase education, awareness, and dialogue around important diversity issues. SA+P community members participate in diversity dialogues and learn core skills (i.e., cross-cultural communication) for working within a diverse community. Our diversity snapshots, an ongoing public slideshow with images and voices of community members, prompt reflection on how we perceive others and challenge us to reexamine our misconceptions. Our goal is to gain fluency in recognizing and addressing those policies and practices that create barriers to the successful recruitment and retention of underrepresented talent.

- Leadership/Coordination activities take place along several fronts. At the MIT level, we work with established MIT summer programs that bring in high school and undergraduate students for enrichment activities. These programs give us the opportunity to identify talent, introduce them to architecture and design, and strengthen our diversity brand at those students' home institutions. Within SA+P, we are refining accountability mechanisms that support reporting on diversity activities, establishing direct links between diversity committee efforts and departmental diversity agendas, and identifying context-specific solutions and strategies for improved recruitment and inclusion practices.

Moving Forward

At SA+P, we understand that our work towards inclusive excellence cannot be separate from our leadership. We also understand that this leadership is required of everyone: our students, professors, staff, and our dean. As the designers of our community, responsibility for its success or failure falls to each and every one of us. Our commitment is personal and continues. Since 2007, we have enjoyed some increases in recruitment and retention of underrepresented talent. We understand better the unique challenges of this work and continue to refine our strategies, learn from our disappointments, and build on our successes. We have established the Robert R. Taylor graduate student fellowship to support talented students. We are expanding our network of individuals, institutions, and programs that connect us to underrepresented talent. There is much more to be done. Through our shared understanding of inclusive excellence @ SA+P we will continue to learn, listen, and act to realize our vision of a diverse student and faculty body.

Additional information about SA+P diversity programs may be found at: http://sap.mit.edu/about/diversity. **rchapman@mit.edu.**