



ASLA Diversity Summit 2016 Report

ASLA HQ, Washington, D.C

July 9-10, 2016

Introduction + Key Takeaways

Landscape architecture is currently facing a crisis of diversity. African Americans and Latinos together account for less than 10 percent of graduating landscape architects. These demographics fail to reflect that of the wider U.S. population. U.S. census data projects that minorities, now 37 percent of the U.S. population, will constitute 57 percent by 2060. To remain relevant and useful to the country's increasingly diverse communities, landscape architecture must become a more ethnically and culturally diverse profession.

Four years ago, the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA) inaugurated the Diversity Summit in order to better understand and address the profession's lack of minority members. The 4th annual ASLA Diversity Summit brought together 12 landscape architects to identify tactics that ASLA could implement over the next 12 months in order further the cause of diversity. Discussions were geared towards recruitment of minorities in to academic programs and mentorship of minority students and practitioners. Summit participants drew on their experiences as minorities in the field to devise ways of leveraging school outreach programs, scholarships, professional networks, and technology to achieve said goals.

Participants, some new, some returning from last year's summit, engaged in a series of group discussions and brainstorming exercises to devise ways of integrating design and landscape architecture principles into elementary, middle, and high school education, as well as how best to manage post-degree mentorship.

Each diversity summit has built upon the progress of years previous. Participants in the first diversity summit examined the causes for lack of diversity within the profession and turned those findings into an action plan; year two saw participants tackle strategies for early exposure and mentorship within the field; in year three, general public awareness of landscape architecture was adopted as a goal, along with implementing mentorship models amongst minority youth in order to guide them toward college programs.

The one-and-a-half-day summit was facilitated by Juanita Shearer-Swink, FASLA, and Terry Poltrack, ASLA director, Public Relations and Communications.

The participants were:

Returning:

Roberto Rovira, ASLA

Mercedes Ward, ASLA

Aaron Ruffin, ASLA

Angelica Rocquemore, ASLA

Melissa Henao-Robledo, ASLA

New:

Ailyn Mendoza, ASLA

Kelly Fleming, ASLA

Paula Barreto, ASLA

Monique Basse, ASLA



Luis Hidalgo, ASLA
Paul McGehee, II, ASLA
Kene Okigbo, ASLA

Observers:

Joel Albizo, CLARB
Kona Gray, ASLA, LAF
Marq Truscott, FASLA, Council of Fellows

Facilitator:

Juanita Shearer-Swink, FASLA

ASLA Support Staff:

Terry Poltrack, Director of Public Relations and Communications
Carolyn Mitchell, Honors and Awards Coordinator
Kris Pritchard, LAAB Accreditation Manager
Aaron King, Summer Communications Intern

Summary of Proceedings

Day One

The summit kicked off with remarks by Juanita Shearer-Swink and Terry Poltrack, who welcomed the guests and re-stated the case for encouraging diversity among landscape architects. Poltrack also reiterated the goal of these summits, which is to take account of current efforts to encourage diversity and devise additional steps that the ASLA can take to boost black and Latino enrollment in landscape architecture programs. Poltrack noted that overall admissions into landscape architecture programs have declined. Strategizing on how to encourage minorities to enroll in these programs would address both the enrollment and diversity issues within the field.

Paths to Landscape Architecture: Group Discussion

After the presentation, participants engaged in a round-robin exercise to introduce themselves, explain their paths into the profession, and describe their career experience to date. Their introductions to the profession varied widely. Some had been interested in design and other creative fields since they were young, whereas happenstance led others to pursue a career in landscape architecture. Many had come to the profession later in life, after stints in other fields. Some had the benefit of studying under or working with other minorities, while others had experienced the isolation of being the only minority in their office or academic program.

These introductions put on display the fact that all participants had somewhat different interests and areas of expertise in the field of landscape architecture. The multitude of skills represented in the room, made possible by training in one single profession, was noted and raised throughout the summit as something unique to the field that could be advertised to minority students and their parents.

Steps-to-Date

After the introductions, Poltrack summarized efforts taken by ASLA since the third summit to attract minorities to the field of landscape architecture. First, ASLA synthesized and made public its findings from the third summit. Interviews were filmed with participants in order to create more content that promoted diversity. Outreach to media was a



priority, with ASLA producing press releases about the summit intended for Spanish media. ASLA also produced two matte news features that were distributed to a range of media with minority readership.

The ASLA annual meeting played and will continue to play an important role in the promotion of diversity in landscape architecture. The 2015 annual meeting devoted a discussion to the subject of diversity that focused on helping attendees recruit and retain minority talent. A larger discussion regarding diversity is planned for the 2016 meeting.

ASLA also produced a brochure introducing readers to landscape architecture, to be dispersed at schools in underserved areas. And ASLA adopted a middle school in Washington, D.C., and held several events with the students that introduced them to landscape architecture and design. This school adoption venture would inform much of the program for the day, as participants brainstormed ways that design and landscape architecture principles could be integrated into elementary, middle, and high school education.

A brief discussion then took place regarding the goals set out for the summit and what themes were worth considering. Participants sounded off on considerations they thought should be made throughout the proceedings. There was a general consensus that public awareness of landscape architecture should be prioritized over early exposure, considering it a greater barrier to advancement of the profession as a whole. Roberto Rovira, a returning participant, shared his insight that the profession stands at a critical juncture in time when cities are being rebranded and redesigned. He suggested that participants should consider ways of leveraging that effort. Rovira added that participants should be thinking of ways of associating landscape architecture with technology and the sciences so as to avoid seeming backward and nostalgic. In line with that thinking, Mercedes Ward raised the point that many people, minorities included, don't understand the benefits of landscape architecture. These opinions would inform several discussions that took place during the summit.

Breakout Session I

Participants were then divided into three groups to begin their first brainstorming exercise. Participants were tasked with identifying ways to raise awareness of the profession among school-aged children. Each group considered either elementary, middle, or high school students. While the focus was on devising ways of raising awareness among minority students, the results are applicable to all. The ideas that the groups developed are as follows:

K-6

1. Organize field trips to parks or nature preserves that promote environmental stewardship.
2. Promote the study of texture and color in outdoor environments.
3. Learn about the home applications of gardens and plants.
4. Instill an emotional attachment with nature.
5. Promote drawing to express ideas.
6. Promote making and building.

The suggestion to promote drawing with elementary school children was very well received. An idea to tie drawing into technology in the later stages of K-6 was also voiced and well-received, though not explored in much detail. The other point made was that at this age level, it is more important to introduce concepts that underlie the profession, laying a groundwork, rather than talking about the profession itself.



Grades 7-9

1. Promote the study of design and ecology through summer school incentives.
2. Involve students in school gardens.
3. Involve students in the design and layout of features of their schools.
4. Incorporate design and ecology readings into reading lists.
5. Promote design and ecology through existing popular computer apps.

The point was raised that this age group is the least likely to respond well to the imposition of new rules and subject matter. Rovira recommended leveraging existing systems, such as popular video games, in order to impart spatial awareness and education to these students.

Grades 10-12

1. Leverage clubs and extracurricular activities to impart awareness of landscape architecture.
2. Connect students with landscape architecture firms for the purpose of internships.
3. Include students in day to-day management of their high school campuses.
4. Host career exploration seminars that educate student about the field.
5. Host prom photo events that incorporate landscape or floral design.
6. Educate students on availability and application process for scholarships.

The topic of scholarships was raised while discussing outreach to high school students and became a prominent topic throughout the summit. Many participants noted that the costs of a landscape architecture degree represent a huge barrier to pursuing one. Lack of transparency with regards to landscape architecture salaries further dissuades low-income minorities from pursuing a degree in the field. Participants unanimously supported making more scholarships available to minorities and promoting existing scholarships.

Adopt-a-School Lessons Learned

Karen Trimbath Grajales, ASLA public relations manager, presented her findings on the Washington, D.C. Adopt-a-School program. Grajales worked with the ASLA Potomac chapter and the D.C. public school system to pilot the adoption of Charles Hart Middle School in southeast Washington, whose students are majority African-American. The purpose of this pilot was to gain sufficient lessons and experience to construct an “adoption kit” for other ASLA chapters and firms to use. The adoption involved introducing students to the profession of landscape architecture with an in-class activity, leading them on a field trip to the Washington, D.C. riverfront and Canal Park, and hosting a career fair at which landscape architects presented on their work.

After watching the presentation, participants were invited to give their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities that such programs might present. The number one challenge that participants identified was the amount of resources that school adoption might draw from firms. One participant suggested incentivizing the program by offering CEU credits. Another suggested pairing firms together to adopt a school so as to build professional relationships.

All of the participants recognized the unique opportunities for outreach that such a program creates. It was noted that adoption programs affectively allow for the introduction of landscape architecture into an otherwise rigid curriculum. Suggestions for improving the process of adoption included tailoring the toolkit to specific themes. “Sustainability” and “urban renewal” kits were two such suggestions. Other suggestions included incorporating teachers early in the



adoption process, take a long-range approach with numerous points of contact with the students, and getting a good sense of what school would like to achieve with the adoption.

Breakout Session II

Participants again split into three groups in order to brainstorm methods for landscape architecture programs to recruit a diverse student population, both on campus and off. Their combined recommendations were:

1. Advertise the multitude of options graduates have due to the multidisciplinary nature of landscape architecture study.
2. Include culture-centered courses in the curriculum.
3. Advertise the degree through minority student organizations.
4. Advertise the degree through minority professional organizations that mentor students.
5. Promote diversity as an asset that minority students offer.
6. Amend model bylaws of ASLA chapters to include emphasis on minority scholarships.
7. Encourage ASLA chapters to perform minority outreach.
8. Improve diversity among faculty.
9. Develop community college courses.
10. Increase transparency with regards to expected salary.
11. Improve professional practice courses.
12. Utilize highly designed public spaces on campuses to advertise the degree program.
13. Promote and explain the licensing process to increase transparency and prestige of landscape architecture programs.
14. Promote the forward-looking nature of the field with regards to issues such as security and social justice.
15. Give people of color more visibility in marketing materials.
16. Reach out to parents of minorities through events such as parent weekends.

The recommendation to encourage ASLA chapters to offer minority scholarships and perform minority outreach was hailed among the participants, as school costs and return on investment are huge factors for minorities in choosing a field of study. Most participants were unimpressed with their programs' professional practice courses, which they said did not teach particularly relevant skills. Improved courses might showcase different kinds of design firms or offices that graduates could expect to work at. Poor professional practice courses can negatively impact landscape architects during their careers, forcing them to choose a different profession. The other recommendation that garnered the most support was upping the visibility of minorities, both among program faculty and in marketing materials.

Day Two

Navigating the University and Firm Cultures as a Minority

Summit participants were prompted to consider the challenges of minority students and young professionals, devise ways of mitigating those challenges, and offer advice to the two groups.

Challenges

1. Learning the ins and outs of applications for schools, scholarships, and jobs.
2. Curating a good relationship with one's professor or boss.
3. Maintaining confidence.



4. Fitting in.
5. Involving one's self in discussions and activities.
6. Knowing how to effectively communicate one's perspective.
7. Seeking advice.
8. Striking a good work/life balance.
9. Networking.

Mitigation Strategies

1. Research scholarships.
2. Engage early and often with one's professors and boss.
3. Be visible and active.
4. Find a mentor.
5. Self-evaluate.
6. Practice self-care.
7. Enjoy activities outside of the discipline such as sports and music.
8. Build relationships beyond the limits of one school or one job.
9. Diversify one's skillset.
10. Understand the value of a minority's perspective

Advice

Despite brainstorming separately, the three groups listed many of the same challenges and mitigation strategies. The same was true for advice. Several participants emphasized the importance of building a good rapport with one's instructor. An important relationship in its own right, it is especially important for minorities who may be more easily isolated. Knowing the worth of one's unique background is also hugely important, as it can and should be a source of confidence. That piece of advice goes hand in hand with understanding how best to share one's perspective, as it's not always accepted positively.

Major Action Items

The summit's final exercise required participants to cast votes for major action items that they would like ASLA to follow up on. The action items were accrued from the previous exercises. Below are the most popular action items related to recruitment, listed in descending order of popularity:

1. Advertise and develop minority scholarships.
2. Produce case studies on minority practitioners.
3. Create targeted advertorial material such as videos and pamphlets.
4. Include culture-centered courses in program curriculum.

Related to mentorship, the most popular action items are:

1. Develop a mentor program for students and young professionals as well as an accompanying best practice guide.
2. Provide visibility and opportunities for minority students and practitioners.



3. Develop a comprehensive diversity guidebook that students and young practitioners can use as a resource for navigating issues unique to minorities in the profession.

The action items chosen reflect a clear preference for short-term, easily actionable, yet effective strategies. In addition to the above recommendations, participants suggested an ASLA webpage devoted to diversity that acted as a “one-stop-shop” for minority students, practitioners, or others considering a career in landscape architecture. The page could house links to scholarships, case studies, advertorial videos, answers to frequently asked questions, a list of minority practitioners willing to mentor, and other content. One participant suggested that an “are you willing to mentor” question be added to the official ASLA member questionnaire.

Closing Remarks

Kona Gray expressed his admiration for the group of participants, reminding them that they have the opportunity to be torch-bearers in a sense and fill an important niche in the field of landscape architecture. Shearer-Swink and Poltrack thanked the participants for their contributions. The summit adjourned.