1. Introduction

Since 2009, the Department of Planning, Policy, and Design (PPD) in the School of Social Ecology has offered the Bachelor of Arts in Urban Studies program in which students can immerse themselves in learning fundamental knowledge, critical perspectives, and analytical skills needed for a more complete understanding and management of urban areas. Recently, as the program celebrated its fifth anniversary, PPD has begun to reflect on the program’s performance for its first five years. Furthermore, it has attempted to establish a blueprint for the future and identify effective strategies for improving the quality of the Urban Studies program, which has become an academically challenging and socially relevant offering in undergraduate education at UCI.

The present assessment project, which has been carried out with support from UCI’s Division of Undergraduate Education and the School of Social Ecology Dean’s Office during AY2014-15, has played a central role in PPD’s ongoing Urban Studies program enhancement. More specifically, it has focused on the assessment of student learning outcomes and experiences in the program – i.e., how the program’s existing curriculum has contributed to student learning and career development, and how the program can better meet the emerging needs in urban studies education. The project has also intended to build a solid foundation for future (sustainable and systematic) program assessments.

2. Assessment Project Activities

The assessment project involves the following three major activities: (i) development of an assessment framework tailored to the Urban Studies program, (ii) direct assessment of the student learning outcomes from a sample of PPD courses, and (iii) an online student survey which can provide indirect measures of student learning and preparation for their careers.

2.1. Assessment framework development

One of the most important components of the project is to develop an assessment framework with a focus on the student learning outcomes in the Urban Studies program. As part of the project, the department held a faculty retreat (on September 29, 2014) to garner faculty support for the assessment project and to discuss the program’s existing vision and learning outcomes. Another department-wide faculty meeting was organized (on January 12, 2015) to establish the program’s new vision building on the discussion at the retreat (see Appendix 1) and exchange ideas to reform the Urban Studies curriculum to effectively achieve the program’s vision and core learning objectives. Based on the newly established vision, a three-dimensional assessment framework (explained in section 3.1) has been developed and used for subsequent phases of the project.

2.2. Assessment of a sample of PPD courses

To assess the student learning outcomes in the program, the project team collected the teaching materials and student work from a sample of PPD courses – PPD 4, Introduction to Urban Studies (gateway class required of all Urban Studies majors and minors), PPD 108, Cities and
Transportation (elective for the Urban and Community Development cluster), PPD 139, Water Resource Policy (elective for the Urban and Environmental Sustainability cluster), and PPD 153, Elements of Environmental Design (elective for the Urban and Environmental Design cluster). Two PPD faculty members independently reviewed the collected materials (including course syllabi, assignments, detailed exam results, and other student products – see Appendix 2 for an example of the collected materials), examined match of student learning objectives to these materials, and assessed the scope of student learning in these courses with the primary goal of confirming expected learning outcomes or revealing areas in need of improvement. The faculty assessment has been conducted based on the three-dimensional assessment framework and detailed criteria developed in an earlier phase of the project.

2.3. On-line student survey

In addition to the sample course assessment, the project team developed an on-line student survey to assess their learning experiences in the program and to collect their concerns and opinions about the program, particularly the Urban Studies curriculum. The survey was sent to all 123 students enrolled in the Urban Studies program in the 2014-15 academic year. The duration of the survey was two weeks, from May 17 to May 31, 2015. Of the 123 students, 44 (35.8%) participated in the survey. To motivate student participants, six participants were randomly picked to receive a $50 UCI Student Store gift card. Appendix 3 presents the survey questionnaire, divided into four sections: (i) General information, (ii) PPD courses: Self-reported understanding of the subjects, (iii) Your career: Self-reported confidence in their preparedness for career, and (iv) Other questions and suggestions.

3. Accomplishments & Major Findings

3.1. Three-dimensional program assessment framework

First of all, the project team has developed a new framework to systematically assess the program’s curriculum and student learning outcomes. The framework encompasses three dimensions of elaborated assessment criteria – (i) program objectives, (ii) specializations, and (iii) student capabilities – designed to measure the extent of student learning areas and outcomes from various perspectives. More specifically, the first dimension represents four major pillars of PPD’s Urban Studies education, identified by the department through faculty discussions, while the second dimension covers the four clusters (specializations) in the program: urban and community development, urban and environmental sustainability, urban and environmental design, and urban governance. The last dimension, student capabilities, is included to examine how the curriculum helps students acquire their ability of critical thinking, research, synthesis, data analysis, management, design/visualization, communication, and interaction.

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1 The four program pillars include (i) theoretical frameworks for assessing the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relations within cities, (ii) conceptual and analytical tools for understanding complex and interconnected urban processes and systems across multiple spatial scales, (iii) critical perspectives on historic and contemporary planning and governance strategies to address challenges including social inequality, sustainability/resilience, and inclusiveness, and (iv) technical and communicative skills for developing and implementing solutions to urban problems which are sensitive and responsive to local conditions, needs, and aspirations.
The following figure illustrates the framework of three-dimensional space in which one location indicates the intersection of a program objective, specialization and student ability development (e.g., a sample course covers the goals of critical perspectives and conceptual and analytical tools with a focus on urban and environmental design, while enhancing students’ data analysis and design skills). Such visualization of the comprehensive assessment in three-dimensional space provides a useful tool that enables the department to better understand the role of each course and the coverage of the entire curriculum.

Figure 1. Urban Studies Program Assessment Framework

3.2. Significant value of PPD courses
The project team applied the three-dimensional framework to the assessment of the student learning outcomes in the Urban Studies program, focusing on a small sample of PPD courses: PPD 4, 108, 139, and 153. As mentioned above, using the framework, two faculty members independently assessed the sample course materials and a variety of student products. Also, the three-dimensional assessment criteria have been employed as a basis for the development of the proposed online student survey.

The faculty assessment of the selected courses detected evidence of the significant contributions made by these offerings. For instance, PPD 4 was found to “introduce students to a critical lens for studying the urban context with a strong focus on the political economy of cities and regions … [and direct their] attention to issues of inequality, class, and demographic change.”, and “students demonstrate[d] their comprehension of these [important] concepts via the two exams”. The assessment also indicated that these courses reflect the program’s educational objectives adequately and provided an effective environment for student learning. Furthermore, elective courses were found to cover the core knowledge and skills associated with multiple specializations, while fulfilling their goals of promoting students leaning in a specific area. This unexpected, but interesting, finding suggests that a majority of PPD courses provides
an opportunity for students to learn a range of theories, perspectives, and skills beyond the boundary of a single specialization and highlights the program’s focus on integrated and cross-cutting approaches to urban studies education.

The online student survey reinforced the faculty assessment findings. In particular, students’ responses to the survey questions #15-18 revealed that PPD electives as well as PPD 4 covered the domains of more than one specialization. For example, the responses for PPD 108 included various concepts concerning not only urban and community development but also urban and environmental sustainability. This result is in line with the findings from the earlier faculty assessment of the course – e.g., “while the course focuses mostly on urban development, it also touches on the other three specializations of the major: governance, environmental sustainability and environmental design.” The students’ responses for PPD 139 suggested that they had a chance to thoroughly understand water resource issues and to propose feasible solutions in the course. With a main focus on urban and environmental sustainability, this course related environmental issues to the domains of urban governance. The faculty assessment also stressed that this course is highly relevant to urban governance as well as sustainability, as it “help[s] students understand water issues through a political, economic, and sustainability lens.” and “use[s] water policy as an avenue for understanding urban governance issues”. Regarding PPD153, the students’ responses indicated that the course provided an opportunity to learn core design principles and to think critically about how physical environment factors can influence social and psychological processes. Beyond the boundary of urban and environmental design, this course covers various concepts of environmental sustainability. As stated in the faculty assessment, students are “encouraged to integrate themes of sustainability and energy conservation into their [design] projects” and develop their ability “to engage with issues of sustainability”.

3.3. Lessons for curriculum improvement
The assessment project also provided some useful lessons for improvement to the Urban Studies program curriculum. For instance, students’ response to our open-ended survey questions (e.g., Q#26. If possible, please provide any additional information regarding your opinion about the Urban Studies program in helping you prepare yourself for your career, and Q#30. Please describe any changes you would suggest to strengthen our Urban Studies program.) showed their desire to have more technical and practice-oriented courses. One student noted, “there needs to be more emphasis/classes on technical skills for a career in planning.” Other students expressed interest in additional technical courses: “It would be great if this program offered more technical courses.”; “offer more courses that teach and require an application of skills. We need to be prepared to actually create and design the spaces that we learn about. Studio classes should be offered more frequently”; “I also believe that we should offer more courses in urban/architectural design as well as practical methods such as GIS.” This finding is consistent with multiple choice question #29 which asked students what additional courses they would like to see implemented and the specific topic they identified as being the weakest in question #13. In response to Q#29, 49% of the survey respondents stated they would prefer to have “Courses related to practical/analytical methods (including GIS).” In Q#13, the program’s education regarding technical and communicative skills received the lowest score, while students’ rating of the program regarding theoretical frameworks, conceptual and analytical tools, and critical perspectives were generally positive.
3.4. Momentum for the future (sustainable) assessment

One additional notable accomplishment is increased awareness of the importance of program assessment in the department. Not only faculty but also students appreciated this assessment project and its potential contribution to elevating the quality of the Urban Studies program. The project team has also realized that our recent graduates (particularly those who are currently enrolled in the PPD’s graduate program) are willing to support the program assessment by sharing their own experiences and participating in the project as graduate assistants.

The increased awareness and support will be essential for continuing assessment and improvement of the program beyond the current project period. The department will use the products and findings of this assessment project as the basis for establishing an appropriate cycle for program assessment and responses to assessment results in the future. More specifically, the three-dimensional framework and the student survey layout/questionnaires will be utilized for continuing program/course assessment. In addition, based on the project findings, the department will keep making efforts to determine the fit of student learning objectives with existing courses, to better understand the effectiveness of the Urban Studies curriculum, and to identify meaningful ways to modify and improve the program’s structure and course offerings. Furthermore, the project results will be incorporated into the department’s long-term strategic planning process, in which attention is paid not only to the Urban Studies program itself but also its integration with graduate programs in the department.

4. Conclusion

The present assessment project is an essential part of PPD’s on-going effort to assess and advance student learning outcomes in its Urban Studies program by identifying areas needing improvement and establishing an effective approach for sustainable program assessment. It has provided an opportunity to develop an assessment framework which is tailored to the Urban Studies program and can be used for the department’s continuing program/course assessment. Moreover, the project has made it possible to gain momentum for future assessment by promoting the awareness and support for the department’s program assessment and related activities among the faculty and students.

Through the faculty assessment of a sample of PPD courses and an online student survey, the project has also helped us rediscover the value of existing courses and their comprehensiveness. With the courses, the Urban Studies program has significantly contributed to students’ learning of a range of theoretical frameworks, conceptual and analytical tools, critical perspectives, and technical and communicative skills. Doing so enables UCI students to pursue their career in an advanced graduate program or relevant professional field. The Urban Studies curriculum will be improved continually by addressing the emerging needs (e.g., additional courses that can help student acquire more practical and analytical skills) detected through the project and future assessment.
Appendix 1. Urban Studies’ Vision Statement

The Urban Studies major is an interdisciplinary program for students who want to learn how to foster more equitable, inclusive, sustainable and livable cities. It integrates theories, analytical tools, and experiences from the fields of planning, policy, and design to investigate the causes, prevalence, and consequences of urban challenges and to develop approaches for addressing them.

The Urban Studies major builds on our School’s social-ecological foundation by teaching students how to discover, engage, and transform complex urban systems. Majors learn about:

- **Theoretical frameworks** for assessing the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relations within cities
- **Conceptual and analytical tools** for understanding complex and interconnected urban processes and systems across multiple spatial scales
- **Critical perspectives** on historic and contemporary planning and governance strategies to address challenges including social inequality, sustainability/resilience, and inclusiveness
- **Technical and communicative skills** for developing and implementing solutions to urban problems which are sensitive and responsive to local conditions, needs, and aspirations

As cities become more global and complex, an increasing number of jobs require integrative thinking and problem-solving skills. The Urban Studies major provides students with a foundation for future careers and graduate study in practice-oriented fields including urban planning, public policy, housing and community development, transportation planning and environmental management and in research-oriented fields including urban planning, sociology, geography, economics, and political science.
Appendix 2. An Example of the Collected Student Products
(from PPD 153: Elements of Environmental Design – Photographed)
Appendix 3. Online Student Survey

Survey

Urban Studies Student Survey 2015

Introduction
The Department of Planning, Policy, and Design is currently engaged in an assessment project to enhance student learning outcomes in its Urban Studies program. As a part of the assessment project, this survey is designed to measure and monitor the effectiveness of our current curriculum in helping students understand the core knowledge and skills and prepare themselves to move forward with their career goals. Participation in this survey is voluntary, and the survey should only take approximately 10 minutes to complete. Your responses will be used only for the educational assessment purpose. In addition, all personally identifiable information will not be associated with your responses to the survey. Thank you in advance for your participation.

* = Required question

PART 1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1. *Are you currently enrolled in UCI's Urban Studies program?
   - Yes, Freshman
   - Yes, Sophomore
   - Yes, Junior
   - Yes, Senior (or more than four years)
   - No, I am not an Urban Studies student - PLEASE STOP TAKING SURVEY

2. *In which academic year did you join the Urban Studies program?
   - Academic Year 2011-12 or earlier
   - Academic Year 2012-13
   - Academic Year 2013-14
   - Academic Year 2014-15

3. *When is your expected graduation date?
   - Academic Year 2014-15 (including Summer 2015)

4. How many PPD courses have you taken (including Spring 2015)?
   - Two or less
   - Three to Five
   - Six to Eight
   - Nine to Twelve
   - Thirteen or more

5. Are you a current member of the Urban Studies Student Association?
   - Yes
   - No

6. Are you a transfer student?
   - Yes, from another major at UCI
   - Yes, from another institution
   - No

7. Are you pursuing any other major at UCI?
   - Yes
   - No
   If Yes, what is the second major you are pursuing?

8. Are you pursuing any minor at UCI?
   - Yes
   - No
   If Yes, what minor are you pursuing?
How did you become interested in Urban Studies?

- Recommended by teacher/professor/counselor
- UCI Catalogue or other sources of the Urban Studies major description
- PPID Classes
- Other

If Other, how did you become interested in Urban Studies?

10. If possible, please provide any additional information regarding your selection of B.A. in Urban Studies at UCI.

PART 2. PP&D Courses

11. In what area(s) do you want to specialize? (please select all that apply)

- Urban and community development
- Urban and environmental sustainability
- Urban and environmental design
- Urban governance
- Other area(s)

If Other, what is your area in which you want to specialize?

12. Did you have area(s) of specialization prior to joining the Urban Studies program?

- Yes
- No

13. *Please answer the following questions.

How well did the Urban Studies program assist you in determining your area(s) of specialization?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- Very Poor
- Can't Determine

How would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies:

Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Program regarding your area(s) of specialization?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies program, regarding theoretical frameworks for assessing the social institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relations within cities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies program, regarding conceptual and analytical tools for understanding complex and interconnected urban processes and systems across multiple spatial scales?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies program, regarding critical perspectives for historic and contemporary planning and governance strategies to address challenges, including social inequality, sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies program, regarding technical and communicative skills for developing and implementing solutions to urban problems which are sensitive and responsive to local conditions, needs, and aspirations?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, how would you rate the education you received in our Urban Studies program?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

44. The following is a current list of PPD courses. Please select one course that you think most beneficial to your learning of each of a) theoretical frameworks, b) conceptual and analytical tools, c) critical perspectives, and d) technical and communicative skills.

Course Listing:
- PPD 4 Introduction to Urban Studies
- PPD 40 Urban Sociology
- PPD 100 Special Topics in Urban Studies
- PPD 101 Urbanization and Social Change
- PPD 102 Urban Inequality
- PPD 108 Comparative Urbanization
- PPD 104 Urban America: Construction and Consequence
- PPD 105 California’s Population
- PPD 107 Urban and Regional Planning
- PPD 108 Cities and Transportation
- PPD 109 Housing and Urban Development Policy
- PPD 110 Urban Economic Development Policy
- PPD 112 Foundations of Community Health
- PPD 113 Poverty in Developing Countries
- PPD 130 Cities and Food
- PPD 131 Environmental Sustainability I
- PPD 132 Environmental Sustainability II
- PPD 134 Human Ecology
- PPD 139 Water Resource Policy
- PPD 150 Experience Design
- PPD 151 Environmental Psychology I
- PPD 152 Cultural Ecology and Environmental Design
- PPD 153 Elements of Environmental Design
- PPD 155 Urban Design Principles
- PPD 156 Urban Design and Graphics Studio
- PPD 166 Urban Public Policy
- PPD 167 Public Policy and Management
- PPD 169 Public Policy Analysis
- PPD 170 Health Policy
- PPD 172 Latino Metropolis
- PPD 177 Chicano Movement
- PPD 178 Divided Cities

• PP&D TBD Environmental Law and Policy
  a) Theoretical frameworks (for assessing the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relations within cities)
  
  b) Conceptual and analytical tools (for understanding complex and interconnected urban processes and systems across multiple spatial scales)
  
  c) Critical perspectives (on historic and contemporary planning and governance strategies to address challenges including social inequality, sustainability/resilience, and inclusiveness)
  
  d) Technical and communicative skills (for developing and implementing solutions to urban problems which are sensitive and responsive to local conditions, needs, and aspirations)

15. Have you taken PP&D 4: Introduction to Urban Studies? In thinking about your experiences in PP&D 4, what are three of the major concepts/theories/skills you learned in the course?

16. Have you taken PP&D 108: Cities and Transportation? In thinking about your experiences in PP&D 108, what are three of the major concepts/theories/skills you learned in the course?

17. Have you taken PP&D 139: Water Resource Policy? In thinking about your experiences in PP&D 139, what are three of the major concepts/theories/skills you learned in the course?

18. Have you taken PP&D 153: Elements of Environmental Design? In thinking about your experiences in PP&D 153, what are three of the major concepts/theories/skills you learned in the course?

19. Have you taken PP&D 166: Urban Public Policy? In thinking about your experiences in PP&D 166, what are three of the major concepts/theories/skills you learned in the course?

PART 3. YOUR CAREER

21. Which of the following best describes your future career path?
   - Graduate program in urban planning
   - Graduate program in public policy
   - Graduate program in other areas
   - Local or state government
   - Federal agency
   - Private planning, design, or development firm
   - Nonprofit organization
   - Other

   If Other, indicate below:

22. Which of the following best describes the area/sector you will work for?
   - Economic Development
   - Environment and Sustainability
   - Housing and Community Development
   - Land Use and Real Estate Development
   - Public Policy and Administration
   - Transportation

Survey

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- Urban Design
- Other

If Other, indicate below:

*Use the following scale to indicate which you believe to be most to least important for your career. 1: Most important - 4: Least important.

| Theoretical frameworks (for assessing the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of human-environment relations within cities) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Conceptual and analytical tools (for understanding complex and interconnected urban processes and systems across multiple spatial scales) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Critical perspectives (for historical and contemporary planning and governance strategies to address challenges including social inequality, sustainability, resilience, and inclusiveness) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Technical and communicative skills (for developing and implementing solutions to urban problems which are sensitive and responsive to local conditions, needs, and aspirations) | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |

24. Which of the following skills do you think is important for your career? (Please select all that apply)

- Critical thinking: your ability to understand and explore a broad range of urban issues
- Research: your ability to identify a problem and address it in a scientific manner
- Synthesis: your ability to synthesize large amounts of information
- Data Analysis: your ability to collect and analyze numerical or other forms of data
- Management: your ability to plan and manage various types of activities
- Design/Visualization: your ability to create and use visual materials (e.g., maps, graphs)
- Communication: your ability to communicate with others in a verbal or written form
- Interaction: your ability to work with other professionals or general public, more broadly
- Others

If Other, indicate below:

25. In general, how well has your education in Urban Studies prepared you for your desired career?

- Exceedingly Well
- Well
- Adequately

If possible, please provide any additional information regarding your opinion about the Urban Studies program in helping you prepare yourself for your career.

**PART 4. OTHER QUESTIONS & SUGGESTIONS**

27. Do you think a 5-year integrated program (that enables students to earn both B.A. in Urban Studies and a professional master’s degree) will be beneficial?
   - No
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies and Master’s in Urban and Regional Planning
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies and Master’s in Public Policy
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies and Other Master’s Degree

If Other, what other integrated Urban Studies and Master’s Degrees programs would be beneficial?

28. Do you think a certificate program along with your Urban Studies degree will be beneficial?
   - No
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies + GIS (Geographical Information Science) Certificate
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies + Project Management Certificate
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies + Sustainability Certificate
   - Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies + Other Area(s)

If ‘Yes, B.A. in Urban Studies + Other Area(s),’ please indicate other area(s) in which a certificate program would be beneficial.

29. If the department can offer several additional courses, what do you think most helpful?

30. Please describe any changes you would suggest to strengthen our Urban Studies program.

31. Thank you for completing our survey. We appreciate your input. Six of the survey participants will be randomly selected for a $50 UCI Student Store Gift Card. Please provide your UCI Net ID below to enter the reward drawing.

Next: Verify >>  or Cancel