

Executive Summary

Advancing Pathways to Equity in Urban Planning: Insights from the 2023–2024 UPCD Planning Studio

The Urban Planning and Community Development (UPCD) Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston undertook a two-semester graduate planning studio (Fall 2023–Spring 2024) to evaluate, strengthen, and institutionalize the Boston Pipeline Initiative—an inter-institutional effort to expand pathways for youth of color into the planning profession. Rooted in a commitment to social justice, workforce development, and community-engaged scholarship, the studio combined program evaluation, stakeholder engagement, and strategic planning to examine how planning education and professional access can be restructured to better reflect the demographic and lived realities of the communities planners serve.

Context and Motivation

Despite Boston’s racial and socioeconomic diversity, the planning profession remains disproportionately unrepresentative, particularly in leadership roles. The Boston Pipeline Initiative was established to address this disparity by introducing high school students—primarily from historically underserved neighborhoods—to planning as a field through immersive, place-based learning experiences. Since 2022, UPCD and its partners have implemented summer programs, internships, and after-school initiatives designed to build awareness, skills, and long-term engagement with planning careers.

The 2023–2024 Planning Studio was tasked with assessing the early impacts of this initiative and developing a scalable, institutionally grounded model for its future growth. This work responds to broader questions within planning practice: How can institutions meaningfully diversify professional pipelines? What forms of collaboration sustain such efforts? And how can educational programs move beyond exposure to create durable pathways into careers?

Approach and Methods

The studio adopted a mixed-method, community-engaged research design. Graduate students worked in teams to collect and analyze qualitative and quantitative data through:

- **Stakeholder Interviews:** Engagement with students, program staff, institutional partners, and peer organizations to understand program impacts, challenges, and opportunities.
- **Comparative Case Studies:** Analysis of youth-focused planning and design programs across the United States to identify best practices and structural models.
- **Community Mapping and Network Analysis:** Documentation of the institutional ecosystem supporting the initiative, including public agencies, nonprofits, educational institutions, and private sector partners.
- **Visioning and Co-Design Workshops:** Facilitation of collaborative sessions with stakeholders to articulate shared goals and future directions.

These methods enabled both a grounded evaluation of the program's current performance and a forward-looking assessment of its institutional and operational needs.

Key Findings

1. Demonstrated Impact on Student Engagement and Aspirations

The Summer Program and associated activities have been highly effective in introducing students to planning concepts and fostering a sense of agency in shaping their communities. Participants engaged in applied research on urban heat, neighborhood design, and environmental justice, culminating in public presentations and proposals. These experiences expanded students' awareness of planning as a career and strengthened their confidence in academic and professional pathways.

2. From Program to Pathway: The Need for Continuity

While short-term immersion experiences are impactful, stakeholders emphasized the importance of sustained engagement. The initiative is already evolving

beyond a summer program into a multi-stage pathway that includes internships, mentorship, and year-round programming. However, this transition requires intentional design to ensure continuity, progression, and long-term support for participants.

3. Institutional Fragmentation as a Structural Constraint

The initiative currently relies on a network of partners—including universities, public agencies, and nonprofits—whose contributions are critical but often loosely coordinated. This distributed model enables innovation but also introduces challenges related to governance, accountability, and resource stability. The absence of a centralized institutional “home” limits the program’s ability to scale and sustain its impact.

4. The Central Role of Partnerships and Networked Governance

Partnerships are a defining strength of the initiative. Collaborations with local planning agencies, community organizations, and educational institutions provide students with exposure to real-world practice and professional networks. However, maintaining and expanding these partnerships requires formalized structures, clear roles, and shared accountability mechanisms.

5. Equity Requires Structural, Not Just Programmatic, Change

The findings underscore that diversifying the planning profession cannot be achieved through isolated programs alone. It requires coordinated interventions across the educational and professional pipeline, including recruitment, training, mentorship, hiring practices, and institutional culture. The Boston Pipeline Initiative represents a promising model, but its success depends on embedding equity goals within broader institutional frameworks.

Strategic Directions

Based on these findings, the studio developed a set of strategic recommendations to guide the next phase of the initiative:

- **Establish a Dedicated Institutional Home:** Create or designate a center or institute within UMass Boston (or a partner entity) to anchor the initiative, ensuring continuity, governance, and resource coordination.

- **Design a Multi-Stage Pathway Model:** Integrate summer programs, after-school activities, internships, and post-secondary transitions into a coherent pipeline with defined milestones and support systems.
- **Strengthen Partnership Infrastructure:** Formalize relationships with key partners through agreements, shared metrics, and coordinated programming to enhance stability and impact.
- **Develop Sustainable Funding Mechanisms:** Diversify funding sources, including public grants, philanthropic support, and institutional investments, to support long-term growth.
- **Implement Evaluation and Learning Systems:** Establish ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes to assess outcomes, inform program improvements, and demonstrate impact to stakeholders.

Broader Implications

This work contributes to emerging conversations in planning practice and education about the role of institutions in shaping equitable access to professional opportunities. It highlights the importance of moving beyond short-term interventions toward sustained, system-level approaches that address structural barriers to entry and advancement.

The Boston Pipeline Initiative, as examined through this studio, illustrates both the promise and complexity of such efforts. By combining community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and applied research, the UPCD Planning Studio demonstrates how academic programs can serve as incubators for innovative, equity-driven models of practice.

An Overview of Student Outputs - Business Plans for Program Implementation

As part of the Spring 2024 studio, three student teams translated the findings from the fall semester's evaluation and research into **three comprehensive business plans**. These plans explore alternative institutional and operational models for advancing the Boston Pipeline Initiative and scaling its impact over

time. Collectively, they reflect a progression from analysis to implementation—demonstrating how planning research can inform actionable, real-world strategies.

1. Beacon Pathways: Urban Planning and Community Development for Boston High Schoolers

This plan proposes a structured, multi-pronged program centered on youth engagement, workforce development, and professional networking. Key components include a two-week summer immersion program, paid internships, and biannual networking events that connect students with practitioners. The plan emphasizes community-centered curriculum design, multilingual engagement, and strong partnerships with public and nonprofit institutions, alongside a detailed operational and funding strategy to ensure program sustainability.

2. Youth Beacons for Change: Implementation of the Boston Pipeline Initiative

Building directly on the fall semester’s evaluation and visioning work, this plan advances a theory-of-change-driven model for expanding the initiative. It foregrounds program impact, stakeholder collaboration, and the importance of institutionalizing the initiative within a stable administrative structure. The proposal outlines pathways for scaling the program across Boston schools, strengthening mentorship systems, and integrating evaluation mechanisms to guide long-term growth and accountability.

3. Urban Horizons Institute (UHI)

This plan envisions the creation of a dedicated institute housed within UMass Boston’s Sustainable Solutions Lab to anchor and expand pipeline programming. It introduces a comprehensive ecosystem approach, combining summer programs, after-school education, scholarships, and potential academic pathways (including accelerated degree programs). The model emphasizes institutional partnerships, long-term funding strategies, and the integration of education, workforce development, and community impact under a unified organizational structure.

Synthesis

While each business plan presents a distinct model, several common themes emerge:

- The need for sustained, multi-stage pathways rather than one-time interventions
- The importance of institutional anchoring and governance structures
- The central role of partnerships across public, nonprofit, and academic sectors
- A shared commitment to advancing equity and representation in the planning profession

Together, these plans demonstrate the capacity of studio-based learning to generate not only critical analysis, but also implementable strategies that bridge education, practice, and social impact.