

## Social Ecology Graduate Student Town Hall

Online

May 8, 2018

### Welcome/Purpose

- Purpose of Town Hall is to address graduate student questions and concerns in a safe, anonymous space
- Online format to maximize student attendance
  - o Patience is appreciated as we try a new format
- Both the Director and Asst. Director of Graduate Student Services will be taking notes and a summary of responses will be provided

### Previously Submitted Questions

1. UP3 Name Change
  - a. Does the school plan to release a formal memo or press release to explain the name change of the Urban Planning Public Policy/PPD department?
    - There is still conversation within the department about the name of the program and the department as a whole. The department plans to have a decision by early Fall.
2. Teaching Assistant Concerns
  - a. Is it possible to change undergraduate course times so that it's not from 7pm to 10pm? Alternative times: 5pm to 8pm or 6pm to 9pm to avoid long days for students and TAs alike.
    - Those alternative times are available and often preferred by faculty. For each course, instructors are required to submit three days/times. Whether they end up with those times depends on factors such as classroom availability and classroom size.
  - b. Assigning TAs to courses that match their skillset (e.g. students with qualitative backgrounds on SE 194W).
    - We hear you! Many factors go into TA assignments, and we recognize that "fit" is important. Students can request particular assignments, but they are not guaranteed. 194W, a qualitative methods writing course, is the primary way UGs in our School fulfill the undergrad writing requirement. It is offered every quarter and demands a lot of TAs because of the TA-to-student ratio mandated for W courses. This has led us to develop new ways to fulfill the W requirement (e.g. 195W). We hope that as we reduce the demand on 194W, we will be able to reduce the number of TAs on the course and have a better fit of TAs with that course. Meanwhile, we are considering offering special training sessions for TAs to help them be more effective for 194W.
  - c. Can commuting students be given priority when assignments are made?
    - Every department makes an effort to ensure that TA assignments are equitable and that everyone's needs are met. However, there are almost always special cases that come up when assignments are made. We ask for patience and for students to be proactive and flexible when requesting certain time slots.

- d. Can TAs anonymously provide feedback on the quality of faculty instruction? This may help identify unique or common workplace issues and inform appropriate interventions.
  - It is something we could consider, but we would need to protect the identity of the student(s). Perhaps instructors can have an open forum where they meet with all students and include TAs. If there are workplace issues, those can be shared with the graduate student representative to the climate committee and then raised at a meeting of the climate committee, which includes faculty. We should focus on constructive criticism and actionable concerns.
- e. Can the summer session TA process be revisited? It is not ideal for assignments to be made so late, especially with regard to planning.
  - We try to be respectful of students' plans, but neither the school nor the departments have the final say in whether a summer course is eligible to receive a TA. The eligibility is determined by enrollment criteria set by UCI Summer Session and assignments are finalized by them. As enrollments come in and meet the minimum criterion, classes become eligible for a TA.
3. Virtual Access for Commuting Students
  - a. For workshops/seminars/speakers, would it be possible to webcast or record these events so that students who are not regularly on campus can take advantage of the content presented? This information can be shared with prospective applicants and can be used to promote Social Ecology overall.
    - We can certainly try to record these events and post them online. We'll find out how to access equipment and get in touch with departments to work on this for next year.
4. Science Communication Course
  - a. A suggestion was made at a previous Town Hall to design a Science Communication course for grad students to learn best practices for communicating with various populations outside of the university. Where does this stand? Is this still being considered?
    - There is actually a three-sequence course we are actively considering – one that starts with tackling important issues and working with community partners on a proposal; then a second course that focuses on grant writing or securing funding to “solve” the issue that was identified; the last course would focus on communicating evidence-based outcomes to the general public. We are working on this now and are getting feedback from those who would be involved in designing and teaching the courses.
5. Addressing Microaggressions
  - a. Some graduate students face microaggressions in seminars that negatively affect our performance and places a tremendous amount of pressure on our mental health. What strategies does the School of Social Ecology hope to adopt to alleviate these types of microaggressions on students of color? Will the School of Social Ecology consider creating safe spaces for students who feel this tension in their programs?
    - We recognize these concerns and appreciate that students are voicing them, and we are committed to improving the environment in our school. We want to further develop the idea of being a compassionate university, starting with our departments. We are working to address these issues starting with our faculty/staff and piloting workshops within school. Our

Climate Committee is also actively taking a role in assisting with these workshops and incorporating feedback from our student leaders. Faculty and students affiliated with the Climate Committee offer a safe space for expressing concerns, as do our graduate student services staff. The climate committee also has a website, which will launch with the updated Graduate Student Services site, and email address for sharing concerns ([seclimate@uci.edu](mailto:seclimate@uci.edu)).

#### 6. SBSG Temperature

- a. Almost all of the workspaces in SBSG seem to be excessively cold at all hours of the day, even during summer months. Many of us who work in the building keep sweaters and even portable heaters in workspaces to counteract the chilly temperatures. In conversations with other students, almost all agree that the building is too cold.
  - We will communicate these concerns to our Director of Facilities.

### **Concerns Discussed During the Town Hall**

#### 1. Graduate Student Housing

- a. Students expressed concerns that there is not enough affordable housing to go around for current graduate students
- b. They've brought these concerns to Graduate Division, but the response has not been positive
- c. Are there ways to bring about change through Social Ecology instead?
  - We recognize that housing, and affordable housing in general, is an extremely complicated issue, especially in one of the most expensive areas of one of the most expensive states in the country. In recognition of this problem, Social Ecology has provided additional resources (like the Summer Bridge Grant for incoming students) to alleviate some of the financial burdens students face. Additional creative ways to help with this pressing issue are needed – some ideas:
    - Helping students make connections with local “empty-nesters” who have extra space and may reduce rent in exchange for fulfilling household tasks.
    - Revamping programs (for example, streamlining requirements) in order to reduce normative time to degree to 4-5 years instead of 6-7.
    - Creating in-house teaching or postdoctoral positions for students as an incentive to finish within 4-5 years.

#### 2. Value of being a Teaching Assistant

- a. The deans asked students in attendance whether or not the experience of being a TA is valuable. Answers varied.
  - Value of experience is largely dependent on the faculty member, the class, and the assignment requiring feedback.
  - Attention needs to be paid on the amount of work TAs have to complete when assignments coincide with their own midterms/finals. Students mentioned that they would be able to have more positive, meaningful interactions with undergraduates if they only had more time to devote to them.

#### 3. Format of next Town Hall

- a. How can we better engage graduate students? Get them to participate in events?

- We will try to implement a hybrid Town Hall format where students can come in person, but also log in using the online platform. Perhaps this will be more effective.