

Student Diversity / Recruitment

The UC Berkeley MCP program in the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) has significantly improved its student diversity, increasing the share of students of color from 14% in 2016 to 29% in 2022/2023, through recruitment strategies and integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion elements throughout the curriculum.

DCRP has increased its efforts to recruit and support applicants from under-represented groups, including first-generation college students, international students, and students of color. The process starts in the fall, when DCRP offers online information sessions led by a faculty member. In these webinars, the MCP Chair demystifies the admissions process and answers inquiries about the application process, program requirements, and financial aid. These sessions also allow students an opportunity to ask about program strengths and limitations, faculty research, and what faculty are looking for in applications. The MCP Chair also sends emails about these sessions to local organizations and government agencies that might have more junior staff interested in pursuing an MCP, as well as to undergraduate urban studies departments at other colleges and HBCUs.

Another effective strategy has been led by the CED Students of Color (CEDSOC) group to create a “peer advising” process for BIPOC and first-generation students interested in applying to the MCP program. In this process, applicants are paired with a current MCP student, who reviews their application materials prior to submission and provides them with feedback on their professional and personal statements. Current students also talk to prospective applicants about the strengths and weaknesses of the program, and help to advise them whether DCRP is the right program for them.

The admissions process has also shifted. Since COVID, the department no longer requires GRE scores, and has adopted a more holistic set of criteria which has helped highlight applicants with non-traditional backgrounds for consideration. The department has also long engaged current students in the application review process. MCP students review applications and make recommendations for admission, although faculty make final admissions decisions.

Once admissions offers are made, the MCP program committee hosts an open house for admitted students. The open house transitioned to being online during COVID due to travel restrictions, and DCRP has continued to offer the online format to reduce time and cost barriers for attendees. The Open House programming includes faculty, student and alumni presentations, as well as advising office hours with DCRP faculty. Admitted students who are located in or visiting the Bay Area are also invited to sit in on classes to better understand the learning experience. Events also always include a presentation by representatives from the CED Alumni of Color and CEDSOC groups, to ensure that students from underrepresented groups have the opportunity to ask questions of them. Students from under-represented groups are also contacted by phone or email by either the MCP program chair or another faculty member, congratulating them on their acceptance and encouraging them to reach out with questions.

The MCP program committee makes recruitment funding decisions after students are selected for admission. In consultation with the Planning Students Association and CEDSOC leadership, it was determined that students wanted greater equity in funding offers. Thus, the committee determines the total amount of funding available for scholarships/fellowships, and then identifies the number of equally sized fellowships it can offer. Over the past five years, DCRP has prioritized giving more admitted students smaller awards. While this has improved equity across the cohort, it can make it more difficult to recruit candidates who are receiving larger funding packages from other schools. The committee assesses both need and merit in making these awards.

An additional funding source that MCP students have access to is the Arcus Social Justice Corps Fellowship. It has provided significant tuition support to master’s students in the College of Environmental Design, including students in DCRP and those pursuing concurrent degrees in planning, who intend to focus on social justice work for three years after graduation. The fellowship was established with the goal that Arcus Fellows will graduate with little or no debt, giving them the freedom to pursue careers with social impact. The fellowship experience also includes mentoring from social justice practitioners; internship opportunities; career planning support; opportunities to incubate new ideas; and community-building events.