

spotlight on
POVERTY and OPPORTUNITY
THE SOURCE FOR NEWS, IDEAS AND ACTION

Preparing Future Leaders to Lead with Equity

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Economic growth is often seen as an antidote to poverty (e.g. rising tides lift all boats)—but increasing inequality in regions across the country underscores the fact that the benefits of growth are often narrowly shared.

In most regions, income and racial inequality are a legacy of myriad land-use, housing, education, tax, and economic development decisions that have disproportionately benefited wealthier, white households over lower-income and household of color. For example, for decades, public and private investment in regional transportation systems, infrastructure, and housing fueled the development of suburbs where racially restrictive covenants explicitly kept out black buyers; while [redlining](#) minimized investment in the urban core, where households of color remained.

Today, we see the reverse dynamic: Public and private investment is flowing back into many inner cities, increasing land and housing prices and disrupting social networks that act as the glue to already marginalized communities. This “reinvestment” is fueling a diaspora of community residents, especially black and Latino families, who can no longer afford to stay in their rapidly changing neighborhoods.

But where, when, and how can we have frank civic conversations about who benefits from regional economic decisions—where diverse stakeholders can come together, unpack complex issues, and explore lasting solutions?

We believe universities are uniquely positioned to offer a forum for tough, multi-stakeholder conversations about the role of race, place, and class in regional development. They can bring together students, academics, practitioners, and policymakers from different disciplines and support facilitated conversations that allow for the exploration of creative solutions. A step removed from the political limelight, they offer a more neutral environment for discussion and debate.

This spring, we led a graduate-level course, *Tackling Inequality through Equitable Development – Perspectives on Place, Race, and Class in the San Francisco Bay Area* at the [University of California, Berkeley](#) to test this hypothesis. For three hours each week, we brought together graduate students from multiple disciplines with advocates, elected officials, funders, researchers, organizers, and community residents from across the Bay Area.

We started with a simple question: “Cui Bono” or “who benefits” from regional economic development decisions? As we explored the answers, we focused on the dynamic interplay between race, class, and place; and we explored promising approaches – both practical strategies and public policies options – that could lay the groundwork for [“equitable development](#), whereby everyone has an opportunity to participate in, contribute to, and benefit from regional economic growth and prosperity.”

The class fueled honest conversations about racial inequity and [structural racism](#)—political, social, cultural, and economic systems that cause or perpetuate racial inequity. Instead of asking *whether or not* racism is a relevant force, we focused on *how* it plays out and what can be done about it. The university setting provided a space for tough conversations and fertile ground to explore alternative approaches.

Students brought critical thinking and a bold dedication to holding structural racism front and center in the conversation - when it often falls by the wayside – and fresh lenses, not marked by the political dynamics operating in other spaces. Engagement with practitioners provided the students with nuanced contextual, technical, and experiential knowledge that grounded discussions in the reality of what’s politically and fiscally feasible. This provided them with key exposure to what’s happening in the field, which is often lacking in traditional academic spaces, to better preparing them to be future leaders.

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Tensions rose during planning sessions and in the classroom. One planning call almost broke down when a developer and an advocate went head-to-head, each blaming the other for difficult negotiations over a local development. In many classes, students vehemently challenged speakers who did not explicitly tackle the issue of systemic racism or who assumed that universal approaches would achieve racial equity; and they questioned some approaches, like the notion of using an economic growth argument as a rationale for tackling racial inequality, as opposed to using a social justice or human rights lens.

Tackling Inequality through Equitable Development cultivated a space for the exploration of alternative approaches, shared learning and relationship building. We believe these are key ingredients to developing solutions to regional inequality, which disproportionately impacts people of color. The course's success demonstrated its value as a model for future discussions where racism is squarely addressed and divergent viewpoints are allowed to be heard.

The words of our final guest for the course – Angela Glover Blackwell, CEO of PolicyLink – eloquently summarize why this all matters: “We can’t be afraid to talk about race - it’s been baked into the way our country was founded...we do not need an adversarial table; but instead, we need a round table where we can figure out solutions together.”

Our nation’s institutions of higher education can provide that table and we hope they will.

Victoria Benson was the graduate student instructor for the Tackling Inequality course; Fred Blackwell and Heather McCulloch co-led the course as visiting professors for the Theodore B. and Doris Shoong Lee Chair in Real Estate Law and Urban Planning in the Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of California, Berkeley.

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