



12 December 2022

Dear Authors of 'Collective Letter: Academic Recognitions and Racial Equity at SALA',

Thank you for your 23 October 2022 letter addressed to SALA Leadership and EDI Committee, sharing your concerns for racial diversity among awards recipients from the 2022 MLA graduating cohort, and your recommended actions towards ameliorating racial disparity within SALA. I also acknowledge closely related prior correspondence, a 17 July 2022 letter from Noora Hijra expressing more specific concerns arising out of the 2022 MLA Awards at graduation and a 23 July 2022 letter written in response by SALA's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee chair, Sara Stevens. As some of this prior correspondence has not been published to SALA's EDI Committee blog and provides important context to my letter, I have asked the EDI Committee to post all three documents to the blog.

First and foremost, I want to recognize the vision, care and thoughtful effort that has gone into the concerns and recommendations you have articulated. I also very much appreciate that you offer them in the interest of working together toward a better, more diverse and equitable school. I intend that this be an equally thoughtful and future-focused response, and invitation, to build upon the dialogue that has emerged as that will be crucial to co-develop and implement durable, effective actions.

I frame my response by underlining, as does your and Noora Hijra's letter, that paths to racial equity and diversity in student academic awards is deeply entangled with broader systems, policies, processes and practices that must be addressed in parallel. Both Noora Hijra and Professor Stevens' letters enumerate the more prominent of these exceedingly well so I only highlight them here for acknowledgement and reference (in no implied order of importance or consequence): the donor and sponsor terms of reference that define awards intentions and criteria; the internal processes and procedures through which students are nominated, assessed and selected for awards; the social and academic cultures of the classroom and studio experiences that influence perceptions of merit; and, the overall diversity of the faculty as role-

models, mentors and decision-makers. We will likely learn of others as we engage with you and others to address these challenges. I would argue that we have already started and have made progress toward mitigating some aspects that I will highlight later in this letter. However, I am equally aware that these issues are systemic in nature and we have much work before us to achieve the equitable and inclusive School to which we aspire.

As recommended in your letter, and by others, we first need to define and assess the scope, magnitude and attributes of equity gaps and challenges throughout the School. I vigorously agree with the equity audit recommendation cited in your and prior letters. Since last summer, Tamara Ross, SALA's Associate Director of Administration and Academic Operations, has been learning about, and researching how to do this well. There have been very few academic examples from which to learn or adapt as a model for SALA. However, we now have a much better grasp of the scope and the professional expertise we will need and are currently identifying qualified, arms-length consultants able to do the work. We expect to commission an audit in the coming weeks. The concerns you have raised will most certainly be covered by this effort. Once that audit is complete SALA will have a solid baseline upon which to diagnose, propose and prioritize, and against which to target initiatives and measure, change. From it, we will co-develop strategic directions and actions in collaboration with faculty, staff, students and our external communities and stakeholders. I hope some of you will be willing and able to contribute.

However, we need not await the outcome of an audit before we begin to act to improve the equity of our awards processes and procedures. We have already completed a more narrowly scoped and focused internal review of recent Master of Landscape Architecture awards and winners relative to the breadth and diversity of student cohorts. We will do the same for other SALA programs. We will summarize this analysis and report it to faculty charged with recommending these awards prior to the next cycle in May 2023.

Beyond awards equity, I take some reassurance and encouragement from several crucial framing, policy and infrastructure steps taken in the past few years. Broader themes of equity, inclusion and diversity of faculty, staff and students are more visible, higher priority areas of action across the institution. These themes and actions figure prominently via strategic plans of UBC ([Shaping](#)

[UBC's Next Century](#) – 2018, and [Indigenous Strategic Plan](#) 2020); the Faculty of Graduate and Post-Doctoral Studies ([Strategic Plan](#) 2019); the Faculty of Applied Science ([Transforming Tomorrow](#) 2021); and SALA (Designing SALA, forthcoming 2023). Implementation is in progress, ongoing and expanding every year.

Within SALA, for example, the constitution of an Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee in 2020 has enabled significant early progress — elevating awareness, cultivating underrepresented voices and, shaping direction, guiding policy and implementation initiatives. SALA's EDI, as well as Student Affairs Committees have become productive ways for SALA's administration to connect with students around diversity issues, opportunities and initiatives. We have also been working to expand and better connect faculty and staff with student and alumni representatives through other governance committees as well as ad hoc work groups such as admissions, faculty searches and strategic planning initiatives.

We recognize that the composition of the faculty is among the most impactful actions necessary as an increasingly diverse student body seeks curricula, supervisors, advisors and mentors able to speak to their experience, priorities and aspirations. This is an action we have already initiated. As Professor Stevens' letter highlighted, SALA is currently interviewing candidates for two tenure-track Assistant Professor positions (of six) authorized through the BC Human Rights Commission as preferential hires on the basis of race to address the lack of racial diversity among faculty. We expect to extend that authorization further to imminent Assistant Professor recruitments in 2023.

I will close out my letter with review and comment on the status of actions recommended in your letter. For simplicity and clarity, I will quote and respond to them in the same order as presented:

- To account for the holistic racial composition of awards recipients for future graduating cohorts.

Recommendation addressed above.

- To commission a third-party survey of racial climate and experience at SALA to establish formal and publicly available benchmarks for EDI initiatives going forward.

Recommendation addressed above.

- To continue moving towards hiring practices which support racial equity among SALA faculty.

To elaborate on comments made above, we have just completed the final interview stage of candidates to fill two new tenure-track faculty positions through a preferential hire process. The BC Human Rights Commission Special Program authorization we sought and received, enable us to assess candidates who self-identify as members of a racialized or marginalized community first. Others are not assessed unless there are no qualified candidates in the preferential pool. As that Special Program authorization applies to up to six Assistant Professor positions under this preferential hire program, we intend to apply it to three additional Assistant Professor recruitments (two in Architecture and one in Landscape Architecture) before the end of this academic year. In addition, we anticipate another two - three faculty openings in the next few years that will provide further opportunity to apply this program toward diversifying our faculty. In parallel we are developing a program for current and incoming faculty to support the retention and success of these new voices.

- In addition, we have changed our hiring process to be more responsive to our equity goals.

We have modified faculty position application requirements to ask candidates to highlight how their backgrounds, work and experience would improve diversity in SALA. We have also expanded recruitment committees to bring students, adjuncts, other colleagues who can bring diverse experiences and voices directly into recruitment processes and deliberations.

- To finalize and adopt the 'Teaching and Learning Culture Policy' (previously the Studio Culture Policy) before the end of the Winter '23 academic session.

The EDI Committee is taking the lead on drafting a Culture of Learning Policy/Guidelines to bring to SALA Council for input and approval to then be implemented within the larger SALA community. Our intent is to complete that work by the end of the W2 term.

- To allocate resources towards the provision of EDI training and resources for faculty, staff, students, and external reviewers.

This will necessarily be a multi-dimensional education and retention program, informed by what we learn through and from an equity audit. We expect that it will take some time to research, design and fully implement. We are already implementing anti-bias training for all members of recruitment committees prior to application assessment. UBC is continuously adding training resources around EDI for faculty and staff through the Equity and Inclusion Office, Centre for Teaching Learning + Technology, or the Applied Science EDI.I Committee. Within SALA we expect that an important and distinctive element will be training faculty, staff and students, and external guests and reviewers to share our expectations for an inclusive and welcoming teaching and learning environment.

Several faculty have pursued initiatives, including applying for grants, to bring EDI perspectives and content into the curriculum. History offerings in both Architecture and Landscape Architecture programs are among the first. Some are in development in other subject areas.

- To evaluate opportunities to refine the methods by which faculty and program information are shared, such that they are as accessible as possible for racialized students.

We want to better understand this recommendation for responding to it and will be initiating conversations with students on where gaps and barriers exist and how we might fill or overcome them. We intend to reach out to all student groups including NOMAS and another newly formed student organization to support Indigenous students, for assistance here.

- To review admissions processes to identify and address any latent racial biases in the selection of candidates.

We are learning quickly from recent faculty recruitment materials and process changes and intend to apply similar lenses to the admissions process and with the help of the audit, intend to adjust this process to not only better manage bias but also better communicate our openness and interest in, and support for, a diverse student community.

I sincerely hope my response to your letter, its concerns and recommendations communicates my and SALA administration's interest and openness to listen, learn, and to keep a healthy dialogue going. The perspectives, critiques and encouragement from students and alumni are among our most valuable assets. Thank you for the opportunity to learn from yours.

Sincerely,



Ronald Kellett
Professor and Director,
School of Architecture and Landscape Architecture,

cc.

Mari Fujita, Chair Bachelor of Design in Architecture, Landscape Architecture and Urbanism program

Kees Lokman, Chair Master of Landscape Architecture program

Blair Satterfield, Chair Master of Architecture program

Tamara Ross, Associate Director of Administration and Academic Operations

Sara Stevens, Chair SALA EDI Committee

Att:

23 October 2022 'Collective Letter: Academic Recognitions and Racial Equity at SALA'

17 July 2022 correspondence to SALA EDI committee regarding MLA awards from Noora Hijra

23 July 2022 response from Sara Stevens / SALA EDI Committee to Noora Hijra

COLLECTIVE LETTER: ACADEMIC RECOGNITIONS AND RACIAL EQUITY AT SALA

October 23, 2022

Dear SALA Leadership and EDI Committee,

Writing collectively as alumni and current students of SALA, we have prepared this letter to voice our unease regarding the lack of racial diversity among awards recipients of the 2022 MLA graduating cohort, and to stress the need for decisive actions towards addressing racial disparity within our school.

We hope that this letter will not only support SALA leadership in formulating a response to the disproportionate selection of white students for academic awards, but will help frame the 2022 awards ceremony as a point of departure in a wider discussion regarding racialized faculty and studio cultures at SALA more broadly.

In the interest of brevity and consensus-building, this letter only articulates a limited number of high-level actions asked of SALA leadership, with the assumption that opportunities to share nuanced input will be provided as the school conducts community surveys as a prerequisite to further action.

Our initial high-level asks of SALA leadership are as follows:

- To account for the holistic racial composition of awards recipients for future graduating cohorts
- To commission a third-party survey of racial climate and experience at SALA to establish formal and publicly available benchmarks for EDI initiatives going forward
- To continue moving towards hiring practices which support racial equity among SALA faculty
- To finalize and adopt the *Teaching and Learning Culture Policy* (previously the *Studio Culture Policy*) before the end of the Winter '23 academic session
- To allocate resources towards the provision of EDI training and resources for faculty, staff, students, and external reviewers
- To evaluate opportunities to refine the methods by which faculty and program information are shared, such that they are as accessible as possible for racialized students
- To review admissions processes to identify and address any latent racial biases in the selection of candidates

SIGNATORIES

Noora Hijra, MLA '22

Ivana Lexa-French, MLA '22

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Samantha Miller, MLA '23

Maggie Liu, MUD '23

Elliot Bellis, MLA '25

Laura Liu, MLA '25

Tess Adebar, MLA '24

Robyn Adams, MARCLA '25

Arevik Petrosyan, BDES '24

Zahra Asghari, MARCH '21

Katie McPartlin, MLA '25

Dear SALA EDI Committee,

As a recent alumnus of the Master of Landscape Architecture program, I am writing to share some of my personal reflections regarding the apparent lack of racial diversity among awards recipients within our graduating cohort. In this letter, I attempt to articulate how this imbalance may be related to racialized studio cultures at SALA more broadly, and stress the need for a third-party racial equity audit to effectively address this disparity in future.

AWARDS AS A POINT OF DEPARTURE

The disproportionate selection of white students to receive academic recognitions within this year's MLA cohort is unacceptable. Given that non-white students constitute approximately half of our cohort, a fair selection would ideally see a similar proportion of racialized students represented among the awards recipients. However – even when allowing for pragmatic lenience in adhering to such statistical ideals – the lack of racial diversity among awards recipients is outrageous.

Students of colour have received awards in previous years. However, this does not mitigate the racial imbalance of the 2022 awards ceremony, and arguably makes this situation even more unsettling. Indeed, as SALA has moved towards addressing historic and systemic biases over recent years, I cannot help but view this awards ceremony through the lens of racial anxiety: is this a parting shot on behalf of white supremacy before standards regarding racial equity are enshrined as institutional fixtures?

In this letter, the racial inequity observed at the 2022 awards ceremony is taken as a point of departure in scrutinizing the racial dimensions of studio culture at SALA.

TRACING AWARDS BACK TO STUDIO CULTURE

While I am rightly unsettled by the racial imbalance among awards recipients, I still believe that the recipients were reasonably well-selected based on the award categories as they are currently defined. While there might be a few instances where I could see an award being presented to an alternative student of colour, these instances are neither abundant enough to reliably address the racial imbalance nor indisputably valid beyond my subjective opinion.

This suggests that it is perhaps more productive to scrutinize how students are supported towards achieving awards over the course of their studies, as opposed to the award categories or the selection process – and I propose that this is best achieved by scrutinizing the racial dimensions of SALA's studio culture.

STUDIO CULTURE

The studio is fundamental to education and achievement at SALA.

Approximately half of the awards presented at the 2022 ceremony pertained to studio culture, while the remaining half pertained to technical or disciplinary achievements. While it is true that awards regarding technical achievement also merit scrutiny, I believe that the support students are provided over the course of their studies towards technical achievement are relatively equitable in comparison to studio culture. Moreover, I believe that disparities in resources provided towards technical achievement often stem from inequities in studio culture or interpersonal familiarity within the faculty.

Racial segregation persists within SALA's studios. This inequity largely emerges tacitly and informally as students form social groups, and it is consequently understandable that this issue is often seen to lie beyond the scope of SALA's duty to provide racially equitable instruction. However, in the following paragraphs I attempt to provide key examples of situations where this informal racial segregation gives rise to issues which are within the scope of SALA's commitments to EDI.

A key source of inequity emerges when academic performance within the racially segregated studio environment is assessed by SALA's predominantly white faculty. While the abundant problematics of this situation are widely accepted, I would like to tie this back to the issue of racial imbalance in awards pertaining to studio culture, where the racialized segments of segregated studio environments have not been recognized. Are our white faculty members fully aware and willing to recognize leadership and culture in the racialized segments of their studios?

Similarly, white studio groups remain better informed regarding opportunities at SALA, and maintain closer and more frequent rapport with our predominantly white faculty. Consequently, these students are better positioned to receive awards and recognitions. Of course, this informal interaction between white students and faculty is not intentionally exclusive of racialized students, and remains outside the scope of SALA's influence. However, I could see the recent efforts to adopt more racially equitable hiring practices being a first step in addressing this issue.

As a final example, limited racial diversity within the Landscape Architecture Student Association may be indicative of a wider racialized sentiments: that we do not see ourselves represented among student or faculty leadership; that we do not expect to be afforded a meaningful voice; that we do not expect our contributions will be adequately recognized; that we anticipate critical racialized voices to be alienated; that we are supported by our racialized sub-communities but do not fully belong to the larger institutional community of SALA. Again, the scope of this issue is difficult to address using the top-down approaches available to SALA. However, it is again apparent that this greatly influences which students receive awards, ultimately giving rise to the racial disparity of the 2022 award ceremony.

RACIAL EQUITY AUDIT

While I have attempted to limit the scope of this letter to the articulation of studio culture as fundamental to racial disparities in academic recognitions, I have already gestured towards some potential solutions in this letter. However, the most appropriate course of action towards addressing these challenges in practice would likely begin with the completion of a third-party racial equity audit. This is arguably prerequisite in implementing any other meaningful interventions towards racial equity.

I believe the EDI Committee has worked towards an internal audit of the school. In light of this context, my hope is that this letter renews the sense of urgency with which an audit is pursued, highlights the need to address racial dimensions of studio culture within the audit, and stresses the importance of collaboration with a third-party in conducting an accountable EDI audit.

Sincerely,

Noora Hijra



29 July 2022

Dear Noora Hijra,

I am writing in response to your letter dated July 17. I am writing on behalf of the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee at SALA; I am an Associate Professor at SALA and the chair of that committee, and I consulted with the faculty and staff members as well as with SALA leadership (Ron Kellett, Kees Lokman, Mari Fujita, Blair Satterfield, Tamara Ross, and Tara Deans). They all read your letter and it has sparked discussion among us, and I want to thank you for such a thoughtful and considerate, and generous, letter that calls us to do more to address racial inequity and lack of inclusion in the culture of the school.

In my response, I want to offer more context for the awards process and on EDI efforts in relation to studio culture, and to describe how we will consider anew the prospect of a racial equity audit.

As a group, the MLA award recipients this year did not reflect the racial diversity of SALA's students. This is shocking and falls below the standards we should hold ourselves to as a school. I think that your criticism is completely fair, and that this lack of diversity is certainly a symptom of a larger issue within the school, one that cannot be fixed simply by changing award criteria. As you note, it is embedded in so much of what we do as a school—from student evaluation processes and grading to studio culture and faculty diversity. The EDI Committee exists in order to draw attention to these issues, and I intend to use your letter as evidence that our community is calling us to improve.

Without trying to excuse the lack of diversity in award recipients, I would like to explain how the process works, as context. Awards are made usually based on a donation that the university accepts as part of a donor agreement. These donor agreements come with lots of rules about how the money can be used, including naming the award and the descriptions about what the award intends to promote. At the time a donation is made (usually with an endowment that pays out interest which becomes the student's award money), the agreement is set in stone. Making changes to these donor agreements is time consuming and difficult, and is almost never done. (This is true of other universities and other units at UBC—it's not just SALA that does things this way.) Over time, SALA accumulates more awards based on particular donors' desires and passions (an award for poetic work, for example, or one for sustainability, etc.) and of course we can see that these have their limitations too. Some awards aren't set by donor agreements but by outside organizations (BCSLA or AIBC) intending to create prestige value that

helps students get ahead in their careers. The internal process, where SALA faculty and staff meet to decide on which students get awards, is an imperfect (and I think problematic) process right now that is driven by the donor agreements and seeks to reward high-achieving students but is limited by the lack of clarity in criteria and lack of measurable, comparable information about all students—which is why grades become a default for many of the awards. The system as it is set up provides no incentive for considering the cumulative effect on the school of who receives awards.

Which is why you are correct again to carry this issue into other areas of the school, including the studio culture that creates the grades by which many the awards are given, and the social context that supports the aspects of privilege which are reinforced and rewarded with such a process. (I very much appreciate the careful description you offer of the social groupings within studios and the impact this has.) This is an area in which SALA needs to make improvements, and which the EDI Committee is beginning to chip away at. One area we have put some work into in the last year is to address the most egregious problems of studio culture, and have written a few different drafts of what we started out calling a studio culture policy, and are shifting now to think of as a teaching and learning culture policy (it happens across all SALA classes, after all). We began working from the collective letter sent to the school in June of 2020 that called for change, and outlined ways in which the studio culture has been harmful to students, particularly around the power dynamics between instructors and students, between external reviewers and students, and in work-life balance. Once we complete it, which involves another round of input from students, alums, and faculty, and formatting into audience-based summaries, the policy will be adopted by the school and shared with instructors (faculty and adjuncts) and students, and will give us another tool for improving EDI conditions for students and for encouraging the kind of learning culture we want for all students. Another way in which we are working to change the culture of the school that's specifically addressing racial imbalance is in the change to hiring practices you mentioned, that SALA has received permission from the BC Human Rights Commission to use a preferential hiring process that will mean our next set of hires (up to 5) will be for BIPOC candidates. One focus for our EDI Committee in the next year is preparing the school to support these new hires, to provide training for faculty, staff, and hopefully students too that will lay the foundations for a more welcoming and inclusive SALA.

Racial equity audits are something that we have also discussed in the past, and can discuss again. Our committee has heard from many people that we should survey the school so that we have a set of baseline statistics about our demographics in order to improve upon them. But I have also learned more about the ethics of demographic surveys and found that doing this would be quite difficult, perhaps not as informative as we hope, and nearly impossible to do any historical auditing. As a very small unit of a very large university (that's recently been working on their own [equity surveys](#)), there are many things we are not allowed to know or ask because of privacy. While the sciences, being very large,

can survey to ask about race or ethnicity, we are too small to ask this of our faculty or students, because it becomes too easy to identify individuals. (SALA can be included in larger surveys done by Applied Science, for example, but not within our own group.) But there are other options available to us, such as climate and experience surveys, and we will pick up that discussion again this year, motivated by your letter. And a racial equity audit by an outside consultant can offer us other kinds of insight, beyond basic demographic data, that we ought to consider. It's a valuable suggestion and I am grateful you have called it to our attention.

Finally, I would also like to invite you to meet with me so we can continue this discussion. If you are open to this, I would like to make time to hear more of your perspective. I am so grateful to hear the thoughts you shared in your letter and would welcome further conversation. Our students and alums are surely our sharpest critics and also have a perspective on the school that we as faculty can't have, so I am learning in this exchange. Thank you for the opportunity to learn and to see the school through your experience.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Sara Stevens', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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