Teaching Reflections
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Landscape Architecture Graduate Studio II, offered in Spring 2014 at Mississippi State University, is a graduate level studio course for the first year MLA students. Our department has recently gone through a curriculum change for the MLA program in order to add a non-thesis track into our program. We started the new MLA curriculum in the academic year of 2013 to 2014. The new curriculum provides each studio with a different topic and emphasis. For Graduate Studio II, the course is focused on incorporating current concerns of public health into studio design works.

Graduate Studio II constituted lectures, reading discussions, and two projects. The first project sought to provide students general knowledge and analytical skills regarding landscape performance for public health, and the second project aimed to integrate landscape performance into design practice. The lectures and readings have been designed to provide intellectual background for the two projects. They covered a wide range of topics related to urban planning, landscape design, and health assessment.

The first project has two components—case study and performance metrics. Through an on-site investigation of two types of neighborhood environments—a traditional neighborhood and conventional suburban neighborhood, students examined how landscape design quality would correlate with the landscape performance for public health. The case study helped the students to receive first-hand experiences of how features such as spatial scales, vegetation coverage, pedestrian infrastructure, and architecture can affect people's perception of the environment and their physical activity levels. The scholarly articles read in the course provide research tools for the students to analyze design qualities that would affect physical activity. The case study and readings set a foundation for the students to develop performance metrics evaluating and measuring the design qualities of a community open space that would affect human health. The students made efforts to quantify the design features based on research findings of the existing literature. They also looked at the measurement of landscape performance and the outcome for public health.

The second project was a design project that would convert the abandoned railroad that runs through the city downtown of Starkville in Mississippi into a greenway. The students were encouraged to provide a regional vision for the City of Starkville, exploring opportunities of urban infill and business development in the area as well as provide infrastructures for active living. The metrics the students developed for project one has served as design guideline and an evaluation tool for their projects.

The combination of research, reading, and design has proved to be successful in teaching students both methodologies and knowledge about design for health. They grasped the key issues that related to planning and design practices that would affect human health. The students' works have received high regards from our jury and peer students in terms of level of depth, creativity, and a vision of change for the local community. The following is short summary of the strength and possible improvements for the course:

1. Performance metrics could be more focused on a particular type of landscape. The definition of "community open space" is too broad to develop a metrics for design qualities and performance as a class exercise. A narrowed scope of investigation will be helpful.
2. Instead of simply looking at the measurement of performance/outcomes, the investigation of design qualities that would affect health performance proved to be very helpful in guiding students' design projects to be sensitive to health concerns.

3. Lectures and readings of research papers helped to connect research with design practice.
4. Case study analysis is very helpful, but it is limited by the physical context in which the university is located. Field trips and other forms of research (such as use of internet) might be a good complement to case study work.