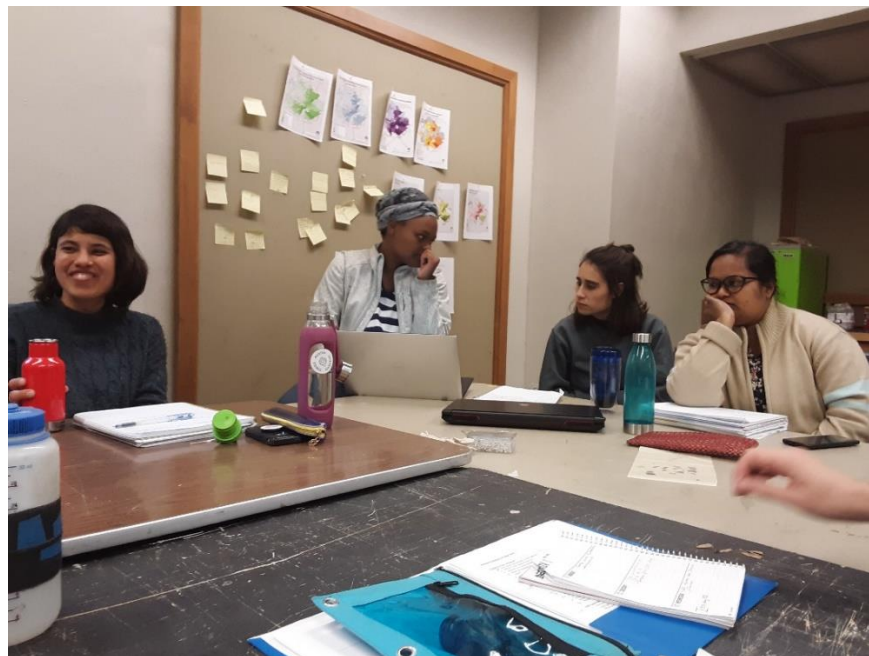


APA Student Project Award – 2020  
Planning Studio: Making Equity Flow  
Community and Regional Planning Program  
University of Texas at Austin

1. Innovation. Originality of concept or appreciable refinement of existing techniques or procedures

Community partnerships are an important and beneficial planning technique. Our practicum was a partnership between the University of Texas at Austin’s Community and Regional Planning Program and the City of Austin’s public water utility, Austin Water. Our student team worked with Austin Water staff to research and recommend innovative ways for the agency to advance racial equity through its policies and programs. Through this partnership, our team meaningfully worked on real-life planning and equity issues, and it exposed us to the challenges and opportunities of working in the public sector. We tackled three program areas of concern that were identified by Austin Water: an employee training program for returning citizens, their customer assistance program, and advanced metering infrastructure implementation. We met once a month with city staff to collect information and workshop ideas. In this way, we were able to build relationships with city professionals, many of whom have been in their roles for many years. We came to find that, despite their high-level positions, city staff saw us as racial equity experts and seriously considered the ideas that we brought to the table.

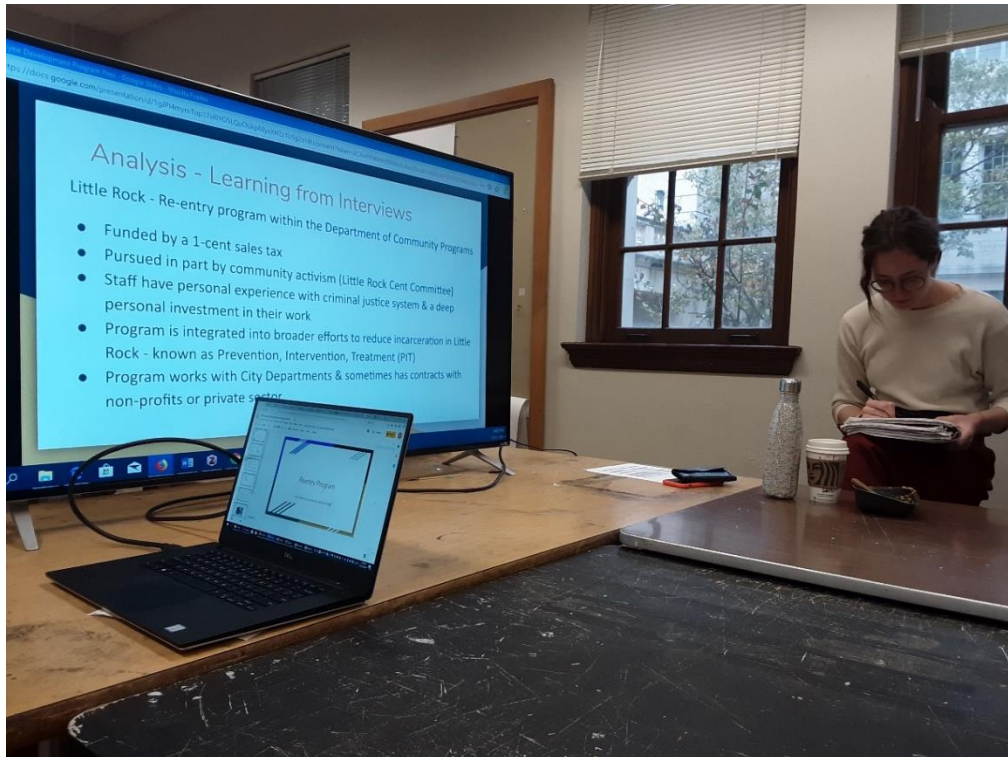
The overarching objective of the project was to learn how racial equity, which often stays in the realm of theory in academic contexts, could be advanced or hindered in very pragmatic ways through city government policies and programs. If we, as planners, hope to advance racial equity in our professional careers, learning how to apply the theory would be vital. And so, we grounded our research in critical race theory and adopted a racial equity framework to guide our work. We then utilized a mixed methods approach—employing both qualitative and quantitative methods—to identify racial inequities in the water sector and in Austin. Through this process, we were able to connect the theoretical to the practical.



Workshopping ideas in studio.

## 2. Transferability. Potential application to other locations, projects, or areas of planning interest

Our research was primarily grounded in critical race theory, but we also employed the urban theory concept of “transferability” as a framework for learning from other cities. Our qualitative methods involved case studies and interviews with other cities’ water department staff. We spent significant time trying to identify cities that had already employed certain practices or policies that support racial equity. We used our interviews to learn more about how these cities’ practices had an impact on racial equity, and we used the lessons learned to inform our recommendations to Austin Water. Our recommendations can, in turn, be adopted by water utilities in other U.S. cities.



Presenting information from our interviews with other U.S. cities to each other in studio.

Racial equity is a challenging to achieve, and our research found that most water utilities struggled to prioritize racial equity as a goal. In a way, we were working with Austin Water to forge a path for planners to advance racial equity through very seemingly mundane, but important, city actions. Our report can be a resource to utilities that are looking for innovative solutions to address inequities. We have also provided recommendations on how policies or projects in one programmatic area of a water utility can be used or altered to achieve better outcomes in another program area within the same water department to advance racial equity. For example, we recommended that loosening eligibility requirements for the customer assistance program while implementing the AMI project would help preserve water affordability for historically marginalized communities.

### 3. Quality. Excellence of thought, analysis, writing, graphics, and character of presentation

Our team consisted of students with diverse personal, professional, and academic backgrounds. We had planners, community organizers, graphic designers, engineers, etc. This created a learning environment in which many different perspectives and ideas were brought to the table to be discussed, supported, and critiqued. We all brought different strengths to the team and collaborated to create a thoughtful and robust final report for Austin Water.



Our team!

We used a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods including statistical analysis, GIS, case studies, and interviews. The data for our quantitative analysis was a combination of water use data from Austin Water and demographic data from the American Community Survey. We were able to draw conclusions about racial inequities by analyzing data and mapping spatial distributions. Our interviews were conducted with water department staff who were program managers or specialists in their respective program areas.

Within the class, we were divided into smaller project teams, each assigned to one of the main areas of concern for Austin Water. We conducted multiple rounds of workshopping within our class, which included presenting ideas and updates. Throughout the process, we met with our partners at Austin Water to get feedback and to make sure that our research was aligned with their equity goals. At the end of the semester, we presented our project to several UT and Texas A&M planning professors, as well as Austin Equity Office staff, who gave us both praise and critical feedback. We incorporated as many suggestions as we could going into the final presentation to Austin Water's Executive Team and CEO. Austin Water staff expressed great interest and excitement about our work and they all seemed to have learned a lot from our presentation.





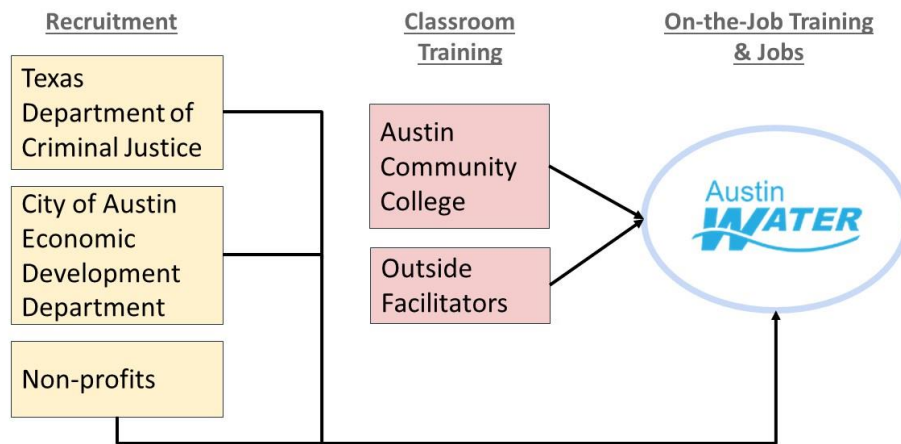
Presenting to UT and Texas A&M planning professors and Austin Equity Office staff.



Presenting to Austin Water's Executive Team and CEO.

4. Implementation. Effectiveness of the work (proposals have been carried out, show promise of being carried out, or demonstrate an effective implementation technique)

Our final report included several recommendations in each program area for how Austin Water could proceed. Each section was very detailed and provided a significant amount of information about existing programs to facilitate implementation. For example, for the customer assistance program, we gave Austin Water three specific examples of how it could change its low-income program to assist renters. We laid out the details of each option including the benefits and challenges, so Austin Water could choose which solution would be most ideal for them to implement. For the employee training for returning citizens program, we created an example logic model and schematic representations of different program models. For the advanced metering infrastructure program, we laid out the essential components of a communications plan for equitably AMI roll-out and implementation.



Schematic representation of our proposed employee training program model for returning citizens.

We have submitted our final report to Austin Water and it is being electronically distributed within the agency and to other water departments. In addition, we recently received news of our report's potential impact. The City of Austin Department of Sustainability is currently updating its Community Climate Plan. Recommendations from each of our program areas are included in the Community Climate Plan draft; the draft will be released to the public this summer. The incorporation of our recommendations in the Community Climate Plan is promising evidence that our work will have a tremendous impact on local climate resilience and equity initiatives. Additionally, we are working on a website so that the information will be available and easily accessible to anyone who would like to learn more about our research and recommendations.

5. Application. Planning principles have been applied or observed, especially in considering a project's effects on other public objectives

Because our project was a partnership with Austin Water, our work was conducted to advance public objectives set forth by the agency. As part of this work, we examined the goals and objectives set forth by the Austin Equity Office, which include “tackling issues of institutional racism” and “creating a culture of equity”, and we used these objectives as a guide. We had direct, frequent communication with Austin Water through emails and meetings to make sure that what our work was informative and actionable.

Within the planning field, our project echoes the need for context-responsive approaches to advancing equity. For example, through our quantitative and qualitative analyses, we found that in an economically and racially segregated city like Austin, the customer assistance program needs to be extended to renters who live in multi-family housing. Additionally, we sought to learn from other cities without framing our learnings as "best practices," but simply as insights that could potentially be transferable to the Austin context. We considered the three Austin Water projects' potential effects on the public, looking for ways they could cause harm and seeking out ways that Austin Water could either mitigate harm or bring about benefits for historically marginalized groups.



Selfie following our final presentation at Austin Water headquarters.