



*Knowledge exchange:
Cal Poly Pomona students
in Shanghai.*

Are new planners prepared for the real world?

Planning Education



P

lanners-in-the-making are coming to university planning programs from all kinds of backgrounds, from sculpture to nursing, from social work to history. They are responding to a calling and are committed to creating better communities. But there's just so much you can pack into a two-year master's program. Are today's planning schools succeeding in producing qualified planners that are ready to work on day one?

To many in academia and the profession, the answer is "yes, but" or "no, but." Robin Boyle, chair of Wayne State University's Department of Geography and Urban Planning in Detroit, notes that new planners joining consulting firms may be under a lot of pressure these days, with employers expecting new workers to be ready to serve clients when they walk in the door.

"In order for these consultancies to work effectively, they need their employees to hit the ground running," he says. "In days of yore, whether it was in the public or private sector, there was an appreciation that in addition to learning and studying in school, there was a term of learning on the job." In today's career climate, planners fresh out of school are being asked to undertake planning tasks they may understand very well in concept, but have had little or no experience actually doing.

Others in the university see success in a collective effort among practicing planners and planning programs to bridge the school-to-work transition. In this view, it is less a question of practice leading academia or academia leading the field, but rather a collaboration of the two powers to shape and advance the field and train better entry-level planners.

"Our goal is to ensure that people we graduate have

2.0

By **Vanessa Geneva Ahern**

What the Newbies Say

T.J. Blakeman, AICP, Abby Janusz, AICP, and Evan Johnson, AICP, all have impressive resumes—despite having been in the field for just a few years. Blakeman and Janusz carry the title of Planner II in Champaign, Illinois, and Boulder County, Colorado, respectively. Johnson is a planner at WilsonMiller in Tampa, Florida.

All three are part of a new generation of planners that's ambitious, well educated, and passionate about the future of the profession. That's why they, along with several other planners under the age of 35, are helping advise APA's leadership as members of the Young Planners Group Task Force. The group's 2008 report to the APA Board of Directors is available at www.planning.org/features.

Recently, they got on the phone with *Planning's* senior editor, Meghan Stromberg, to talk about planning school, first jobs, and what it's like in the real world.



Planning: Have you always wanted to be a planner?

T.J.: Actually, I came in to [the University of Illinois] as a business major. I found [planning] like a lot of students do at U of I: through the course catalog. I did a little research, spent the summer in Chicago, and realized that I wanted to be a part of making communities like that happen.

Evan: That seems to be a common theme. My undergrad is in history and international affairs. I was going through the catalog and found a course about planning in developing areas. It sounded interesting and that's what got me into the field.

Abby: The summer before my senior year in college, I didn't really know what I was going to do. Then, a professor asked me what I was interested in. Well, I said, I like trains, I like reading the newspaper, maps, politics—I just started naming these things off. He suggested I get an internship at a planning department. That led to my first job right out of college, and I just found that I loved working for the public sector, loved the interaction with the community.

After that experience, I decided I needed to go to grad school because I felt that the people I'd be competing with for jobs all had master's degrees and I didn't.

Planning: T.J., your BA is in planning?

T.J.: It is, and I didn't go back for my master's. It was a situation where the right opportunity came at the right time in the city of Champaign,

where I was interning. I took the job [knowing] that my experience will count for something.

Planning: Did your education give you a feel for the jobs you're in now?

Evan: At my internship in Central Florida, they did a good job of exposing me to how planning works on a day-to-day basis. But I still think planning school made me much more prepared for a public sector environment than for the private sector.

[In addition to the actual projects], it's also about learning very quickly how to manage your time, do budgets. I don't think there's anything that planning school could have done to prepare me for that.

Planning: Except maybe a course called *Billable Hours 101*?

Evan: Yeah, Timesheet 101. I really could have used that.

T.J.: We joke, but I found that U of I was very theory based but light on the basic knowledge of planning and how cities work—everything from how to read a plat map to understanding how sewer systems work to doing a subdivision review. I see interns come into the office who don't know [these things either]. I think they should get it as part of their degree.

Planning: What surprised you on the job?

Abby: The thing that I discovered working with the public is that everyone has the same level of concern but they have different levels of understanding. It's been a huge challenge to articulate to people the value that I bring to their

project; I think a lot of people see the planning department as a stumbling block.

Evan: I was surprised that such a large amount of the "public work" in Florida is done with the help of consultants. Many local governments just don't have the resources to staff projects themselves, so a consultant team is typically brought on board. In my job I work on projects for both the public and private sectors. It's been a challenge, though one that has helped me better understand the different perspectives involved in the planning process.

Planning: Why did you go into the private sector versus public and vice versa?

Evan: When I was looking for a job, I looked in the public sector as well. My purpose was to find a job where I'd be working on a variety of projects, preferably in cities, and I was fortunate to find that. It just happened to be in consulting.

Abby: I feel called to public service—I don't think there's any other way to describe it. I think it gets a bad rap for being overly bureaucratic, so I felt like there was something I could do to change that perception.

Planning: Finally, is there anything you would change about planning school?

T.J.: If planners want the public to know who they are, the planning schools need to be more at the forefront. My advice to planning schools is to become more locally active, promote yourself through the media, and get the idea across of what planning is, so students don't have to find it in the course catalog.

the skills needed to be successful entering the field. At the same time, they must have a broad enough understanding of the field and its limitations and know how to fill the gaps,” says Ethan Seltzer, director of the Nohad A. Toulan School of Urban Studies and Planning at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon.

Graham Billingsley, AICP, principal of Billingsley Consultants in Boulder, Colorado, and former land-use director of Boulder County, says that having universal knowledge is a critical quality for new planners to pursue. “It’s a renaissance sort of profession where you have to know a little bit about a great number of things,” he says. “Very few planners come out of school and are ready to take on all that responsibility, but they are trained well enough so that they are capable of learning on the job.”

Changing with the times

Over the past 10 years, planning education programs have tweaked their curriculums to meet the needs of a more diverse and sophisticated student body and a changing world.

“We have good statistical info about the enrollment of planning schools. In general, we have good diversity,” says Fernando Costa, FAICP, assistant city manager and former director of planning and development in Fort Worth, Texas, and chair of the Planning Accreditation Board. “We still lack the kind of diversity we want in a planning school faculty, but student bodies perhaps more than ever today are reflecting the diversity of the communities that our planners will be serving.”

Programs are working diligently to prepare students for the rigors of real planning jobs with classes that focus on negotiation, presentation skills, writing, and critical thinking. Many require that students complete internships.

“Our master’s students have a studio, a required paid internship, and a thesis,” says David Edelman, AICP, director of the University of Cincinnati College of Design, Architecture, Art and Planning. “We focus on professionalism and the exposure to the profession while they are in school. Not all schools do that. Some schools are more rigorous than others in exposing their students to the profession.”

Nancy Frank, AICP, chair of the Department of Urban Planning at University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, notes that practicing communication skills in the classroom is key. “We work very hard on communication—oral, written, and presentation—skills in our program. We certainly hope that by working in small groups, students are testing and honing skills at negotiation, but I think working with a group

of your peers in school is still a very different thing than working in the real world.”

Other educators see better training across the board, but they also detect lingering inconsistencies. Edelman thinks planners are better trained these days, but he cautions that planning education can vary widely depending on the university’s location (small town, large city) and its focus (policy or design). “There is a core in the profession that we are required to teach [for accreditation purposes], but there are lots of differences that those other factors bring to bear,” he says.

Edelman sees advantages in attending a university with a larger graduate planning program, such as the University of Cincinnati, where there are more than 300 students, 16 faculty, and 16 adjunct professors. He advises students who are considering a master’s program to know what type of environment they prefer, even if the curriculum is the same. “In a larger program there is a difference in what you can offer. There is more than one professional in each specialty. If you don’t like a professor, you can go to another one. We are always trying to give our students an edge,” he says.

David Henkel, director of the Masters of Community and Regional Planning program at the University of New Mexico, sees a trade-off in being part of a larger program than the one he chairs, which accepts about 60 students. “With a larger program, larger faculty, you may attract a broader set of perspectives on any given problem, but at the same time there is a greater challenge to actually having them exposed to each other,” says Henkel. There are more intimate connections between the students in his program, he says, so they end up knowing each other personally and later professionally as well.

In the 1970s, planning programs shifted somewhat to make room for social issues. Edelman believes that the better schools have reached a point where both the physical and the nonphysical side of the field are given weight, producing rounded planners.

Showtime

Planning programs are trying to make planning education as realistic as possible, with the understanding that there is a limit to what can be taught in the classroom. “Something students have to learn as they go through their careers is that there is not always a simple right and wrong answer to an issue,” says Richard Willson, FAICP, chair of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. A good planner, he says, understands the interests of various stakeholders and helps figure out creative solutions.

What students can’t learn in school is the political environment in which most planning decisions are made. Books don’t teach what it’s really like to run a major public meeting, or how you deal with a planning commission, or negotiate with a client, says Eugenie Birch, FAICP, chair of the department of City and Regional Planning at the University of Pennsylvania School of Design.

Stacey Blankin, a planner at WRT, the Philadelphia-based consulting firm, who graduated from Temple University with a master’s of Community and Regional Planning degree last January, says that as a new planner she can’t help coming to the table with other life experiences. “You want to be able to interject those experiences, but at the same time you have to realize your limitations as a planner. I think in those situations you want to contribute and play a role in a project, but it can be tricky to navigate confidence levels and ability levels, and contribute meaningfully,” says Blankin.

One must also adjust to transitions and growing pains outside the world of planning. “It’s a very big lifestyle change that hits you hard the first few months,” says Michael Marcus, who earned a Bachelor of Science degree in City and Regional Planning from California Polytechnic State University in June 2007. That first job, he says, “is the first time in your life you don’t get to choose who you’re around every day. And unless you’re with a huge firm or jurisdiction, you’re not surrounded by people of the same age anymore, your peers.”

However, once new planners get over that hump, the new challenges can be exciting. For Marcus, the most rewarding part of being a planner is being able to make a difference in his hometown of Benicia, California (pop. 27,323), where he is an assistant planner and the community development director in the planning division. One current project involves schematic site planning and the adaptive reuse of the historic Southern Pacific train depot. He also represents the department on climate change and sustainability initiatives.

Marcus says that being a flexible communicator can be critical when working in a much lower tech environment than planning school. “In academia they are using the best technology and forward-thinking principles, and that is not necessarily how the working world works; especially in a smaller jurisdiction, they may not have the resources,” he says. Even if they’re used to creating with fancy posters, or using Photoshop and PowerPoint, new planners need to be able to adapt to what’s available without letting quality slip, he adds.

Marcus points out that another challenge

in the workplace can be conveying opinions to an older generation without trying to be pushy or sounding like a know-it-all. It's important to be diplomatic but confident when offering new solutions and ideas.

Chuck Newcomb, AICP, a planner at Banish Associates, Inc. a consulting firm in Flemington, New Jersey, who has been in the planning profession for 30 years, is a self-described Neanderthal in terms of GIS. He says that younger planners have more computer skills than their predecessors and that knowledge is welcomed by his generation.

From his work with the Planning Accreditation Board, Newcomb sees a lack of writing skills as one of the biggest weaknesses in students. Planners are constantly writing, whether it's drafts of ordinances for attorneys, staff reports, or translating planner-ese for nonplanners. Writing succinctly for lay people is a skill that is underestimated, he says.

Newcomb is sympathetic to planners who aren't strong writers, but notes that it is a skill that can be learned. "I was really poor in writing. I've taken courses to improve, and I had people above me who were very skillful editors. They pointed out things over time and I picked things up," he says.

New curriculum

Fernando Costa says that the Planning Accreditation Board recently has focused not so much on prescribing the measures to be used as suggesting appropriate measures by which schools might evaluate their own performances in respect to outcomes. Those measures include tracking how many students pass the AICP exam, employment after graduation, the ability to secure professional jobs, and other outcomes.

That's a relatively new thrust in planning education, but it's also a relatively new thrust in higher education in general. Universities across the country are paying more attention to learning outcomes. "That change requires a significant mind shift for a lot of folks in charge of education," says Costa.

Programs are working on blending the study of planning theory with practical components, such as bringing in practicing planners as guest lecturers, encouraging internships, or offering workshops on new technology. Robin Boyle at Wayne State organized a short workshop on the Google product SketchUp, which is now widely used in both the public and private sectors.

"We're not going to amend our curriculum every time there is a new Google product or new system emerges. What we are doing is taking our core and adapting it. We are not throwing out the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

We are holding on to what's important but we're appreciating there are different ways of looking at it," says Boyle.

Thanks to a partnership with WRT, Penn students work with several WRT associates and partners on planning projects that are similar to pro bono projects. Most of the clients are community groups that can't afford to pay typical consulting fees. Eugenie Birch reports that the teams have completed 75 local plans in the past 10 years. To the students' credit, most of the local plans that the first-year master students prepared in these courses are still in place.

Rob Kerns, senior planner and coordinator for the workshop at WRT, says the firm recruits from the University of Pennsylvania program and hires several new graduates every year. He also believes the course provides students with strong professional and technical skills. "They really go through a professional simulation of a real project in our workshop course, and all first-year planning students are required to take that course. We feel very good about their preparedness," says Kerns.

A course in presentation skills was added for students in the Master of Community Planning program at the University of Cincinnati after the school surveyed professionals from the Ohio chapter of the American Planning Association and alumni—and found that undergraduates had stronger presentation skills than master's students. The survey also indicated that one statistics class could be cut—much to the graduate students' delight.

Birch says that students are starving for courses that help them get more in-depth information and require the skills they've acquired, but that also have a critical and thoughtful component. She cites a popular course in real estate finance as an example.

Students are also asking for more information about urban design and sustainability, particularly how the two relate to each other, says Nancy Frank. "I think that is going to be increasingly important as we begin to cope with urban planning and urban design impacts and opportunities related to reducing our carbon footprint. We're definitely moving into those directions," she says.

Frank says that when she started teaching 15 years ago there wasn't that much interest from the student body in sustainability, and that today water, energy, and global climate change are big points of interest.

Willson agrees that classes on greenhouse gas mitigation strategies and planning for adaptation in climate change will continue to be in demand in the future. "Then there is the globalization of planning," he says, citing

a successful program between his school and the North China University of Technology in Beijing. "We have things to learn from people in other countries—planning schools in different countries are becoming closer."

Maximum exposure

An open dialogue with other disciplines is important. At the University of New Mexico, David Henkel and the directors of the architecture and landscape architecture programs often discuss how each of the three professional programs is evolving. They look at opportunities to help students understand the interrelationships of the disciplines, and in turn, become more successful professionals.

"The challenge for us now is exposing all planning students, irrespective of their concentrations, to a set of skills that familiarizes them with community development, natural resources and the environment, physical planning, and design. I think a lot of schools are constantly fiddling with that kind of equation," Henkel says.

A true appreciation of the political aspects of planning is something that Henkel says has typically been missing in programs over time, but that's changing. "I think students from 1980 to 2000 came out with the notion that planning is a rationally organized profession. That is, you sort through the problem, and come up with alternate solutions and responses. There was very little understanding of the political context. You're not just talking about what is reasonable or ideal or artful," says Henkel.

A large part of his program's pedagogy is conducted in the context of real problems in real communities, and the thread of discussion has to respect how the different constituencies interact with each other, Henkel says.

To Ethan Seltzer, running a successful planning program is as much about nurturing students' passion and curiosity as it is about transferring knowledge and skills. "Our challenge in a lot of ways is first to not extinguish the desire to learn things," he says. "Secondly, we must teach our students how to learn and enable them to understand what they need to learn more about.

"We give them a really good running start. They are really ready to go to work, but there is a limit to how much you can pack into two years," he adds. "I think we do students and the profession a disservice if we imply that you learn all you'll ever need to learn in [planning school]. You're going to have to keep learning every day."

Vanessa Ahern is a freelance journalist based in New York's Hudson Valley.