Conversations with Alumni: Spotlight on Michael Codron

Abstract
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FOCUS: When did you graduate? Which degree did you get?

Michael: I received my MCRP degree from Cal Poly in 1998. This was when the comprehensive exam was still an option. I had started on the route towards a thesis project on how using an electronic, hypertext format could improve general plans in California. Unfortunately (or fortunately depending on your perspective), my life (marriage, children, job) got in the way of completing that project. I think it is still a relevant and worthwhile topic if anyone out there is interested.

FOCUS: Describe your current job. What is your title and position in the organization? What are your primary responsibilities, and what type of work do you get involved with?

Michael: I am associate planner with the city of San Luis Obispo. I work in the Long Range Planning Division. I maintain all of the city’s demographic data and prepare the annual report on the general plan. I am currently working on the Orcutt Area Specific Plan, which includes plans for 1,000 new dwellings in the south-eastern portion of the city. I am also working on annexation of the Margarita area (a neighborhood planned for 868 new dwellings) and annexation of the airport area (1,000 acres of industrial and service commercial land). The project that seems to be taking most of my time right now is the discussion of downtown building height and intensity limits.

FOCUS: Briefly describe your previous jobs.

Michael: Before Cal Poly, I worked for a neighborhood organization in Chicago and had the title economic development officer. My undergraduate degree was in economics, and my first job in the economic development arena led me to discover the planning profession. I started out with the city of SLO as the planning technician, and then became an associate planner in the Development Review Division. I worked in development review for several years before moving on to long-range planning.

FOCUS: How does your education reflect in your work? Do you feel that the classes and skills from the MCRP program support your professional practice? What did the program provide that was fundamental to your professional practice?

Michael: My education is reflected in my work because it created the foundation for my ethics and work habits. I believe that in school our biases become firmly imprinted. Once work begins, there is less time to question every decision and we fall back to what we know. Of course, professional planners, like teachers, really need to continue to research and understand (the) best practices for a wide range of topics. But, once your lives begin, there is less time for introspection and deciding
who you want to be as a professional. You get swept up in performing your specific job duties, and your background is brought to bear on your work through osmosis as opposed to direct application. The MCRP program was especially helpful because of its focus on planning theory. The theory is really what gives you a foundation for making decisions that are comfortable to you as a person and a professional. In addition to the theory, the basic skills of working with site plans and computer applications – especially GIS – have been invaluable.

FOCUS: Which do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of the CRP program?

Michael: I think one of the major strengths of the program is the design focus and the resources available to all students in CAED. I think that planners who have strong architectural skills are exceptionally valuable to the organizations they work for. The weaknesses of the program are probably related to location more than anything else. With the rural setting there is less of an ability to have a practical focus on urban/social factors that would be faced by planners moving into metropolitan jurisdictions.

FOCUS: How is the mix between theory and practice in the CRP program?

Michael: I would say that the mix of core requirements between theory and practice is well balanced, but I would encourage more optional courses in theory. Planners need to come out of school with an ingrained sense of direction with respect to their core beliefs. Then their decisions will come easier and will be more consistent in their professional practice.

FOCUS: What are the critical knowledge areas for planners entering the field? (e.g. land use law, research methods, zoning, housing finance, CEQA, etc.)

Michael: I have not worked for any other public agency beside the city of San Luis Obispo, but my experience here suggests that good organizations have the ability to take advantage of the particular skills that their staff possesses. Therefore, I would suggest a broad-based understanding of all of these knowledge areas, and encourage students to also pursue a specialty in one or more areas that fit their skills and long-term goals.

FOCUS: What are the critical skills/tools for planners entering the field?

Michael: New planners are not often shielded from the public realm, and do best when they have superior technical skills, especially GIS, design, statistics and/or the ability to perform economic feasibility analyses. Ultimately, effective communication skills become the most important skill that a planner can have in their toolbox to help decision makers make the right choices.

FOCUS: What computer applications should planners entering the field know?

Michael: New planners need to know GIS and mapping; they should be skilled in document management and publishing practices – for...
example, how to package a .pdf document for digital press. I didn’t start using computers on a
daily basis until I entered the MCRP program in 1995. These days, students have the general skills
necessary to adapt to new applications quickly.

**FOCUS:** *What was the most challenging aspect of moving from the CRP program to professional
practice?*

**Michael:** The most challenging aspect of moving into professional practice is understanding the
culture of the organization that you move into and how to get your ideas across in a way that is not
combative. The hard part for me wasn’t figuring out what needed to be done, it was how to bring
everyone else along with an idea that requires organizational change.

**FOCUS:** *What do you see as planning’s big challenges over the next 5-10 years, and what does Cal
Poly need to teach students so that they may successfully engage these challenges?*

**Michael:** I think the biggest challenges will come in trying to hold the line on growth and sprawl. For
those agencies that successfully establish growth boundaries, but still want to foster a vibrant economy,
the challenge becomes one of integrating infill and intensification projects with existing development.
There is a balance that must be found between neighborhood preservation and the need for infill, and
planners are best suited to guide the public and decision makers through this process.