Conversations with Alumni: Spotlight on Sean Nicholas

Abstract
Every year FOCUS brings in news on CRP alumni through interviews and articles not only as a way to keep track of their whereabouts, but also to keep a critical eye on the work and pedagogies of the CRP Department. For this issue, we interviewed Sean Nicholas, a graduate of the MCRP class of 2005, who is an associate planner with the city of San Clemente, CA.

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Every year FOCUS brings in news on CRP alumni through interviews and articles not only as a way to keep track of their whereabouts, but also to keep a critical eye on the work and pedagogies of the CRP Department. For this issue, we interviewed Sean Nicholas, a graduate of the MCRP class of 2005, who is an associate planner with the city of San Clemente, CA.

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

**SEAN:** I received my MCRP degree from Cal Poly in 2005, which looking back isn’t that long ago, but it seems like a lot has happened. While there, I completed a Masters Thesis which discussed the ways Mixed-Use Developments could be assessed to determine if they will be successful in their locations. Which meant I got to spend a year and a half hanging out with Vicente del Rio!

**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?

**SEAN:** I am currently an Associate Planner in Current Planning for the City of San Clemente, the southwestern most City in Orange County. My primary responsibilities are numerous, but I will do my best to touch on a few of the more important ones. First and foremost I am a representative of the city and as such have the fine opportunity to work with many wonderful citizens in the City of San Clemente. All sarcasm aside, the interface that we as Planners have with the general public is really important, and a lot of our job is Customer Service. As a planner, I am the moderator between the technical components of developing within a Coastal Community and helping people realize their dreams. Yes, it sounds corny, but the education process is important in teaching people how the development system works.

General Development review is another large part of what I do. Whether it is an Entitlement project for a Mixed-Use Development in the heart of downtown, or reviewing a single-family residence for applicable development standards so they can acquire a Building Permit, there is a variety of types of Development Reviews which we oversee and approve.

I would say Customer Service and Development Review are the two biggest components of my job, and the little things in between are variations of these two overarching responsibilities.

**FOCUS:** Briefly describe your previous jobs.

**SEAN:** I have had an opportunity to work in two communities before San Clemente. My first job was as an intern at the City of Grover Beach and subsequently was promoted to Planner I. During that time I was also the City Planner for the City of Guadalupe. Both were interesting, very different, and incredibly valuable in shaping the Planner that I am today. Grover Beach is a small beach Community in San Luis Obispo County that...
is primarily residential, and while I was there I worked on numerous Planned Residential Development Projects (as I was there in the heart of the housing boom) and a few commercial projects along the Grand Avenue Corridor. Due to the housing boom, and the fact that at that time Grover Beach was more affordable in terms of land prices, I gained valuable knowledge about multitasking and making multiple deadlines.

In Guadalupe, the northwestern most city in Santa Barbara County, I was the only person in Community Development. I did everything. Because I was on my own from the beginning, I learned a level of confidence, decision-making ability, and independence in the work place that has been incredibly beneficial in moving forward with my career.

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

**SEAN:** My education is reflected in my work because it created the foundation for my work place abilities. Presentation and people skills are essential to what I do and were some of the things we worked on most in the graduate program. In essence I have to be able to talk the talk. How I present myself to the public and address their concerns are big parts in keeping people happy. And a happy public makes a happy planner; believe me!

Presentation and communication skills are critical because one will not have a PowerPoint presentation for every project. Yes, one needs to have those skills, but he or she has to be able to have notes and simply talk about a project from a podium to a Planning Commission and City Council. From the various public outreaches, presentations, and projects we completed in the MCRP program—especially the Park Marina Area Design Plan in Redding, from the Project Planning studio—I have become very comfortable with public speaking and consider it one of my strongest abilities in the work place.

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

**SEAN:** The Internship requirement the department has is one of the, if not the, best thing the MCRP program has. I can not speak enough on how valuable that was in preparing me for the public sector. I am sure it is different if students do their internships in larger cities or in the private sector, but working for a small community like Grover Beach let me be hands on and fully understand the day to day job of a planner. Our education and course work is great in giving us the base tools and understanding of why things happen and what requirements are in place and for what reasons. Though, as a student, I remember thinking, “But what do they do all day?” Being in a planning department really allowed me to feel how the process works and what it meant to be a Planner. The only thing I wish I would have had an opportunity to do was to intern for a major development company whose goal it is to build as big as they can as well as making the most profit possible. People always looked at me funny when I said that, especially in the internship class, but
I thought an internship in that environment, especially knowing my interest in the public sector, would be interesting to see how the other side works. That is the benefit in the undergrad versus graduate programs: time to do these things. Though don’t get me wrong, after four years at UC Santa Barbara and two more at Cal Poly, SLO, I was ready to graduate!

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

**SEAN:** I can honestly say that it is very good. In fact, I can also say that it is the reason I came to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Doing my undergraduate at UC Santa Barbara and just discovering what a Planner was, I got a theoretical and analytical review of Planning. The equivalent of a thesis for my undergraduate degree in History was all about the impacts the Tennessee Valley Authority had on the Environment and Modern Day Planning (A real thriller; I assure you!), but, as I said above, even then I was wondering what a Planner does in everyday work. It is because of this drive that I turned down a place in the Graduate Program at UC Irvine to attend the more hands-on approach and experience of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. To this day, it is one of the best decisions I have made regarding my future.

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

**SEAN:** You know, it is hard to say, because there are so many different ways to be a Planner. I remember hearing, in my 1st year, that one of the 2nd year students was going into Historical Preservation, and I remember thinking, “Dude, no way, what is this guy thinking, where the heck is he going to do that?!?” Now I am working in a community with a very strong Historical Preservation movement! You just never know. The basics like zoning and CEQA are mandatory! Land Use Law is more important, I think, in the private sector, especially when it comes to a lot of CEQA related consulting. You will see that if you ever go to a CEQA review class, but it will also be helpful in preparing for the AICP. As far as housing finance and research methods, I have not used those as much. Financing would be more in the private sector, but it is important to know basic budgeting because even at my level I am handling several accounts, budgets, and, at times, consultants to complete different projects. What I use most from Research Methods are the analysis and interpretation of Zoning Ordinance.

**FOCUS:** *What are the critical skills/tools for planners entering the field?* (*e.g. GIS, computer-based design, statistics, surveying, presentation, writing, etc.)*

**SEAN:** Presentation and people skills are essential. I deal so much with the public, and being able to communicate is paramount! One of the best things I did to hone my people skills was to get a customer service job. For three years while in San Luis Obispo I worked for Martin and Weyrich Winery and learned how to build quick rapport with people and build relationships in which I could talk and communicate with a complete stranger. Obviously, I am not serving wine at the counter I am at now, but the basics apply. Building that rapport with my counter customer and to be able to communicate with them are still important. Not only does it make you as the planner look good, but it makes the City look good. GIS basics are helpful, too. We do not have GIS exactly but a program like GIS, so understanding the basic tools and how it works helps a lot, because a lot of programs are similar. Lastly, yes, I have to be able to write and, to be honest, and as most of my Professors would agree, this is not my strong point, but I continue to work on this tool.

"Figure 4
Molly Blooms is an Irish bar with a multi-phase project, nearing completion of phase 1. By the end of phase 3 it will look like a traditional Irish cottage. (photo S. Nicholas)"
FOCUS: What computer applications should planners know as they enter the field?

SEAN: New planners need to know PowerPoint and the frustrating program that is Word. PowerPoint is important, especially for those in-depth complicated projects in which pictures, timelines, outlines, and bullet points can help people follow along and understand the components of the project. Word is the single most frustrating program of all time! One can do a lot with it, though, so get to know the finer points and all the things you can do with Word. It actually would be beneficial to have a small section of the computer class that gets into all the formatting, charts, links, text boxes, image modification, and correction tools that are in Word, especially with the 2007 edition having just come out.

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

SEAN: To be honest, the most difficult thing is having neither a summer nor Christmas break, the fact that I have to be responsible and functional at work, and the fact that showing up hung over at work, like some people used to for class, really won’t fly anymore! (Not that I ever did that!). But seriously, that is what I would say was the most difficult for me, because between my internships and the things we were doing in the program, when school was done I just went to work full time between Guadalupe and Grover Beach and it was nice being able to focus all of my time into being a Planner and getting all of my Planning responsibilities done while not having my Masters Thesis hanging over my head (though Vicente is the greatest and made it relatively painless!). It is nice to know that I work eight or nine hours a day, and when I am done, then it is my time to do as I want. That feeling was weird at first, and I remember thinking, “Really! I can just sit here and BBQ and watch the Angels on TV and not have homework? This is great!” So enjoy it! Plus the boost up in full-time pay helps as well!

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?

SEAN: Again, I think every community is different, especially in terms of the big problems that face them. I think there are overarching problems that are regional concerns. Environmental concerns and issues are at the top of that list, in particular water supply. Also, here in San Clemente, we are facing build out, which means we will become a completely infill and redevelopment oriented community. This will most likely change the way development is perceived in our community. Are people going to be happy with larger mixed-use buildings in the downtown as allowed for in the Municipal Code currently? There are interesting times ahead, and I believe it is that way with all communities, especially with the fall out of the housing market; there will be a change in how development occurs as we move forward into the next 5 to 10 years. What will it be and how it will work? Well, we will roll with the punches, keep an open mind, and see what happens.