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40 Years of Planning, Cal Poly Style

Nicole Smith
*California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo*

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In late October, 100 alumni of the City and Regional Planning department celebrated its 40th Anniversary. Attendees spanned from the class of 1970 to the class of 2008, and came from as far south as San Diego and as far north as Seattle. The two-day event was packed full of activities that celebrated the planning profession and utilized the alumni’s broad experiences to inform the department and its student.

We would like to say Thank you to our sponsors and donors, RBF Consulting, PMC, HMH Engineers, Crawford, Multari & Clark, Earth Design and Jacobsen & Wack, as well as other firms and individuals for providing $3,400 toward the event. These donations greatly helped in defraying the events costs and making it successful.

The kick off party was a sunny Saturday BBQ lunch on Dexter Lawn. As alumni filtered onto campus, an excited crowd formed at the welcome tables as everyone greeted old friends. With a little prodding, alumni began to sit down for lunch and speeches. R. Thomas Jones, the Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design gave an uplifting speech to the audience on the importance of the planning profession and its future at the university, while William Siembieda, Head of the City and Regional Planning department talked about how the Department first was started by George Hasselein and Ken Schwartz, and where the Department is looking to the future.

Following lunch, a Career in Planning panel was developed by Christopher Jordan, providing a contrast of public and private planning as well as a quick run down on employer expectations during the job hunt. The panel included: Rod De La Rosa (T-Mobile), Shannon Nash (City of Simi Valley), Chandra Krout (City of Irvine) and David Davenport (Golden Gate Bridge Authority). About 20 junior, senior and graduate students took advantage of this time, looking for ways to improve their job hunt strategies and trying to decide which planning arena to focus on after graduation. This was not the first connection alumni had with students of the day. An Open Studios was held earlier by student representatives to display current and recent student work. This time allowed alumni to ask students specific questions about the program and their work products.
In the afternoon, alumni gathered to talk about their future roles in supporting the City and Regional department. The main idea was for the alumni to create a small active group that is engaged with the department, its faculty and its students. This group would come to campus twice a year to continue a dialogue with professors on the department’s curriculum, to offer educational programs such as career panels and alumni lectures and organize other events. Also, the alumni wish to build a stronger collective effort, and welcome other alumni who could not attend the anniversary to become involved.

The alumni and guests enjoyed the good feeling of the festivities, which started with the BBQ, and culminated with the evening event at The Art Center. The downtown venue provided a warm backdrop for a jazz band, more food, and, of course, more chatting, laughing and reminiscing. Everyone had a fabulous time and was particularly excited when the cake cutting was announced. The earliest alumni graduates in attendance were Bruce Baracco, Ronald Edgerly, Donald Pinegar and Jeffrey Webster from the Class of 1970. The newest alumni were Jessica Berry and Nicole Smith from the Class of 2008.

To enhance the department’s curriculum, a pre-event Educational Curriculum session was organized by Mike Draze (BS 1974) as a way to update alumni on the existing curriculum for both the Bachelor’s and Master’s programs, and to encourage feedback on specific ways to improve the curriculum and therefore students’ skill at graduation. About 20 alumni, professors and students sat in the new graduate lab, brainstorming ways to balance the skills desired in planning employees and the tight time constraints of the program. Overall, alumni were impressed with the skill sets students were developing through class work. They were happy to see that the curriculum focuses on urban design/development and environmental planning. Alumni also liked that support courses such as collaborative planning were offered, although it was thought that additional course offerings with other departments might round out students’ skills.

Attendees agreed that students needed competent presentation skills. However, alumni felt that new hires regularly lack oral communication and writing skills, and felt this needed to be emphasized more. There was a spirited discussion on environmental planning and CEQA with an
agreement that knowing how to write the findings section was the most important part of the planning effort. Professors Mike Boswell and Adrienne Greve were excited by the group’s suggestion; they had been struggling to cover such a broad topic in 10 weeks. Another skill that should be emphasized for students is a basic understanding of infrastructure and subdivision design, including the ability to read plans, know the lingo and make educated decisions. Alumni were willing to help develop a course or a module to educate students on this topic.

This event would not have been possible without a dedicated group of alumni who worked behind the scenes as the visionaries of the anniversary and provided direction to the City and Regional department. On Friday mornings in April 2008, when Paulo Hernandez (BS and JPH Consulting), Christopher Jordan (BS and PMC), Michelle Gluekert (BS and County of Ventura), and Janna Minsk (BS and City of Santa Paula) would take time from their busy work schedules to conference call the Department. Three basic ideas came out of these conversations; the desire to provide a real world perspective to enhance the planning curriculum, to connect with students and provide valuable career advice and to have a great setting to reconnect with old friends. These ideas became the format for the Anniversary.

The next alumni event will be held in April at the Cal Poly Open House. The video 40 Years of Planning Education, features interviews with alumni, professors and clips from the 40th anniversary event in October. It is hoped that a formal alumni group will form and develop yearly interactions with the department and its students.