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Note from the Departing Department Head

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This is a period of transition for me and for the Cal Poly City and Regional Planning Department. It is a good time to share with the FOCUS audience some thoughts and provide a retrospective of my journey here at Cal Poly. It is also a chance to tell you part of the City Planning story, and why I believe practitioners throughout the state call this the premier professional planning program in California.

Over twelve years ago Dr. Linda Dalton, who had been department head, spoke to me about applying to be the new leader of the City and Regional Planning department at Cal Poly. At the time I had been at the University of New Mexico for twenty years, arriving there with the mission of creating a new graduate community and regional planning degree in the School of Architecture and Planning. Linda Dalton’s suggestion came at a time when I had accomplished the New Mexico mission, created a program from scratch, and established its place at the university, which was well on its way to educating the majority of city planners in the state of New Mexico. I was ready for something else.

Coming to CRP and Cal Poly in 1998 provided new challenges and the opportunity to experience the great potential of “learning from California.” Cal Poly had much to offer, starting with a rich tradition in physical planning and wonderful alumni who were grateful for having gone here. CRP graduates have held positions as planning directors in many cities and counties of California. The department had a history of many devoted faculty who cared about the students, the quality of teaching, and working with local communities. Ken Schwartz, one of the department’s early faculty members, had been Mayor of San Luis Obispo for many years, and others served on the city planning commission. These devoted people were the wonderful building blocks for CRP and have always provided a solid historical basis for who we are, what we do, and how we do it. We continue this tradition today. The faculty focus on student success, the quality of teaching, and their students get the skill sets they need to be valued planning professionals.

In my first four years, I focused on slowly rebuilding the program, hiring bright faculty, and telling the Cal Poly CRP story to a broader audience on campus and in California. In these years college support for faculty development was modest, and I remember that only the department head was provided any travel funds. Our tiny computer lab in Dexter Hall had no Internet connections and no printer, and one tenure-track faculty member simply never returned from Christmas break my first year. Wow, how times have changed. Little by little more and better students came to our degree programs, and the students won many national and state awards. There is much to be grateful for. In 2009, 183 undergraduate students and nearly 50 graduate students were enrolled in the department. CRP graduates work all over the United States and in six foreign counties (Spain, Mexico, Hong Kong, Canada, Australia, and England).

We also began to receive more outside support from alumni, their families, and from the professional community. Through private donations and gifts CRP has established many new scholarships and fellowships including the McDougal Urban Design Scholarship, the Paul Crawford Scholarship, the Berrier Awards, and the Errett-Fisher Family Foundation fellowships. Cal Poly students have received more California Planning Foundation fellowships than any other program in the state.

As I look at the CRP faculty now, there are only two members who were here when I came, Paul Wack and Zeljka Pavlovich-Howard. Both have contributed a great deal to making CRP a great department. Paul has

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1 During the last 10 years CRP graduates have been planning director’s of San Francisco, Las Vegas, Clovis, Santa Paulo as well as the counties of Ventura, San Luis Obispo, San Benito and Lake (all in California).

2 Before I accepted the position at Cal Poly, Steve French, who taught here in the early 1990’s, said it would take three years to rebuild the program. I thought this was too long, but Steve knew the local culture better than I did.
The present-day CRP faculty is deep in urban design and development and environmental planning expertise and practice, and we have solid expertise in transportation planning, a growing area of student interest. Each faculty member has added something special and has shown dedication to making the department a wonderful place to work and to learn. CRP remains dedicated to teaching the California general plan process, as well as newer areas such as climate action plans, transit-oriented development, disaster mitigation, visioning, and form-based codes. There is a real sense of pride in the faculty and mutual respect for each other and our mission. These are positive and valued attributes and make for a good place to learn, to teach, and, increasingly, to produce meaningful scholarship of national and international merit.

There are many differences between now and then. When I arrived CRP was somewhat marginalized, suffering from a few years of interim leadership. Now, the department is a solid contributor to the college, a valued department in the university, and a leader in scholarship and community-based studio education by serving communities on the Central Coast, the Central Valley, and Los Angeles.

CRP has become a respected department because the students and the faculty have played a part in building the respect we now enjoy. The faculty lecture in other departments, teach interdisciplinary courses, and work with faculty in other colleges who share common planning and design research interests. This has made us all stronger, and served to share our message of building better communities to the larger university community.

Each time a CRP class helps an outside community construct their vision plan, an urban design plan, or an entire community plan, the students’ professional skills are strengthened, along with their linkages to the planning profession.

The respect the department now enjoys is a result of many factors moving in very positive directions. Our students have earned national awards from the American Planning Association and the American Institute of Certified Planners, and the community-based projects have helped us redefine the community studio experience at both the BSCRP and the MCRP levels. We practice what other programs only write about. Our courses are strong and get stronger each year, as the instruction is updated and digital tools are integrated into the curriculum. We have broadened the traditional offerings and have globalized the thinking and the practice. Other universities across the United State interested in having a professional undergraduate planning program come to Cal Poly to see how we do it.

We have benefited from having some very brilliant and devoted students who simply want to be the best. I am always proud of the CRP students who lead the Bank of America Low Cost Housing Team Competition to victory over US Berkeley, Stanford, and UC Davis (three times in 10 years). Ah, how sweet it is, and how motivated are our students.

The growth of our master’s program has added to who we are today. We always have had a few good students in each master’s class. But in the last few years we have had more and more better students, from more and more places around the US. They have made us a better department. Being nationally ranked in the Planetizen surveys of 1997 and 1999 is a vote of confidence in our educational model, our students, our journal, and our faculty. When I first arrived we struggled to put together a small master’s cohort, and by 2009 we had many more great applicants than we could admit. Mike Boswell who has coordinated the MCRP degree program for

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3 Linda Dalton left Cal Poly in 2007 for a post as Vice President of Admission and Enrollment Planning at CSU East Bay. David Dubbink retired in 2006 and continues in private practice focused on noise related planning. Linda Day retired in 2004 and works and lives in San Francisco.


4 Student projects have won two American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) national project planning awards, and three students have been chosen to receive the Distinguished Student Planner award from the American Planning Association. One student was the American Planning Association Award for the Best Student Paper in Transportation Planning. Two master’s students have been awarded Congressional Hispanic Caucus Fellowships in Washington, D.C.

5 During the early years of my tenure there was some anxiety that the “traditional skills of hand drawing site plans and perspectives” was disappearing. What was actually happening was an upgrading and modernization of the graphic and urban design skills being taught and learned. The student’s graphic presentations are richer, more complex, and utilize the latest in digital tools to help illustrate the plans being presented. Today, the students learn more and do more than previously.

6 Ric Lee, Amer Moustafa, and Linda Dalton stayed true to his Central Coast roots and his connections with the local planning profession. I thank both of them for sticking with us. Over the years, despite retirements and resignations, we have built a great faculty of whom I am very proud.
many years deserves special credit for picking the best of the crop and making the case for why Cal Poly should be their choice of graduate education in California.⁶

Today we are more international (or global) than ever before. It was not always this way. In 2000 I took 16 students and two faculty members to Honduras to work with a local university to design an entire new community for the thousands of people who lost their homes due to Hurricane Mitch. This trip was the beginning of our efforts to enter into international exchange program. We now have five international exchange programs (with Mexico, Brazil, Honduras, Switzerland and Portugal). The most successful exchange program is with Brazil (for students and exchange scholars), and we have Vicente del Rio to thank for that. I suspect that we will continue to engage globally in different ways. Why? Because it is intellectually interesting, fun, and students want to do this. I suspect that CRP, as in the past, will not look to Europe but to Asia for new alliances as well as strengthening what we are already doing in Latin America. Now some of our students even take their internships abroad (seven different countries by the last count).

We are now in an era when other universities, like San Francisco State University and Fresno State University are asking us to partner with them for a Cal Poly MCRP degree there. They want to partner with us because we “are the real deal.” CRP is a program of excellence that others want to share in.

In 2009, the CRP department moved from Dexter Hall back to the Engineering West building, where it had been located in the 1980’s. As I walked through the department’s newly painted and furnished studio spaces and the wonderful computer lab, checking out the new windowed faculty offices again, I was happy that CRP is doing well and that I am a part of it. I want to thank each and every faculty member, the old ones and the new ones, for the support and commitment to building a great department. I see only more good things for us in the future. I truly hope, that in some substantive way, I have helped you to build your academic and professional careers and be the best you can be.

Linda Dalton told me that anything is possible at Cal Poly if you want to work for it. You need to make it happen. After serving three deans and four provosts during my tenure here, Linda’s words still ring true to me. Our future is what we will make it. Planning is really about inventing the future and the management of urban change. Both involve a passion for making better communities. CRP does this well now and will continue to do this through its leadership role within the College of Architecture and Environmental Design.

George Hasslein, the founding dean of the college, started City and Regional Planning because he saw the need for a degree program in a design college that crossed disciplinary boundaries which would have the ability to address issues of the city in ways no other college program could do. From where I sit, George Hasslein would be proud of what CRP stands for and does today. We have fulfilled Hasslein vision and are part of his legacy. I sometimes sit with his wonderful bronze statue in the office outdoor quad and talk with him about what is happening. I tell him to read FOCUS, the excellent department annual journal, which provides a historic record.

⁶ There are eight (8) Master’s planning degree programs throughout California. It is a mark of excellence that so many great students make Cal Poly their choice. In 2009, seven of the 26 first year master’s students were from out of the state. We have become a national program.
of great student and faculty work. We talk about how the CRP student slogan “get an education, get a job, make a difference” does reflect why people hold the program in esteem.

Planning professionals who have watched the program change and grow over the past ten years comment on the quality of the student work produced, the great presentations made at city council hearings, and the depth of faculty knowledge and their contribution to the profession. CRP is firmly linked to the California planning profession. This is an important part of who we are, and why many people say Cal Poly-SLO is “California’s premier professional planning program.” This outside validation and the genuine success of our students make me feel it was well worth the time and the journey.

From time to time, Paul Wack would put his head into my office and ask if “Are you having fun yet?” At times I could not answer his query honestly. I think the “fun” Paul Wack asked about was always there. From time to time, I just needed to get out from under the paper work to find it and to enjoy it.

No, I have not retired from Cal Poly but simply have changed roles. Now I am a regular faculty member, and I also direct the college’s new Planning, Design, and Construction Institute that serves all the college faculty and also community clients. My hope is to make a contribution to the department as a teacher and a scholar alongside my colleagues and the great CRP students. I recommend you look at the department website often to see the great things we are doing. You are also invited to contact, and get to know, Dr. Hemalata Dandekar, a talented, experienced, and warm person who has taken on the leadership position in CRP. I am honored and delighted that she chose to join us as Department Head. Surely, she will lead the department to its next level of excellence.