

Conversations with Alumni Recent Graduates from the City and Regional Planning Department Cal Poly San Luis Obispo

This section will always feature work by CRP alumni. For this issue, we conducted interviews with four alumni - Phil Dunsmore, BSCRCP Class of 1999; Carrie Loarie, BSCRCP Class of 2000; Nichole Narhi, BSCRCP Class of 2004; and John Sholas, BSCRCP Class of 1987.

Describe your current job.

Phil Dunsmore: I work as an Associate Planner with the City of SLO in the current development review division. I review and prepare staff reports for development applications, subdivisions, zone change requests, exception requests, prepare environmental documents, and make weekly presentations to the Planning Commission, Architectural Review Commission, Cultural Heritage Committee, and City Council on such projects. A lot of time is spent discussing property and development options with clients at the Community Development Department counter and in meetings. The job also includes meeting with neighborhood groups and working towards citywide goals. Other duties include preparation of documents such as subdivision and zoning regulations.

Carrie Loarie: I work as a Project Manager for KTG Y Group—Architecture and Planning. I primarily work with developers and builders who are interested in creating new residential neighborhoods and communities. My work extends from the Las Vegas Valley to the hills of Northern California. From an acre infill piece to thousands of acres waiting to be Master Planned, I design it all!

Nichole Narhi: I am currently a Design Planner for KTG Y Group Inc. I work closely with the Planning Manager and Mike McKay (BSCRCP 2004) on projects throughout the Inland Empire and Las Vegas. I work through projects with clients and other consultants from initial site design and planning to client/city presentations.

John Sholas: In 2003, I started JP Shoals Associates. JP SA is a small firm specializing in municipal planning services to local agencies. The firm also provides project management and environmental services to public agencies and private landowners. My other job is the Grover Beach City Council.

Elected in 2002, I am currently the Mayor of this coastal community. Grover Beach is in the midst of some major planning efforts to revitalize the Grand Avenue Corridor. Significant projects include a beachfront lodge/conference center at the entrance to Pismo State Beach, a transit-oriented development near the Grover Beach Train Station at Highway 1 and Grand Avenue, and mixed-use (commercial and residential) developments along the Grand Avenue Corridor. My planning education has been a great asset in these efforts.

Describe your previous jobs.

Phil: I previously worked for the City of Atascadero (three years) as an Assistant Planner with similar duties. A part of the Atascadero job included code enforcement. In such a small community you end up doing a little of everything!

Carrie: I have been with KTG Y for the past five years. Prior to that, I interned with the City of Morro Bay, RBF/Urban Design Studio, and Calthorpe and Associates.



Figure 1. Phil Dunsmore, BSCRCP Class of 1999.

Nichole: During my junior and senior year at Cal Poly I worked as a planning intern for the City of Morro Bay. This was the perfect school internship as the people were wonderful, the hours were flexible, and it supplemented my education beyond what I was absorbing in the classroom. That job built my public planning process foundation by allowing me to work with projects to get them through the system. Basic plan checking, permitting, writing staff reports, and making Planning Commission presentations solidified my understanding of public sector planning. Now that I work on the other side of the process, I feel more competent to work with projects, as I understand the process my clients must navigate before a project gets built.

John: I have worked for public agencies and a private civil engineering firm. I worked for the cities of Atascadero, Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo, and EDA-design professionals. While with the public agencies, I performed both advanced and current planning duties, including preparing and administering General Plans and specific plans, preparing environmental reports, processing subdivision maps, and evaluating projects for compliance with federal, state and local regulations. My job with EDA involved project management on development projects in both San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties.

How does your education reflect in your work?

Phil: My education is an exact reflection of my work. I started working as a City Planner just after graduation. I commonly use all of my Cal Poly skills such as teamwork, design skills, GIS, and professional writing.

Carrie: Prior to enrolling in the CRP department, I spent my first year as an architecture undergraduate at Cal Poly. When I realized that I wanted to be a designer—on a larger scale—I was fortunate to have the opportunity to work with Linda (Nikki) Day and Zeljka Howard. The community design labs further helped me to develop and embrace my design skills.

Nichole: I recently was working on a project where I was the novice of the group. I was surrounded by lawyers and developers who had been in the business for 20 plus years. I felt out of my league, however in the formation of the master plan document, my knowledge and experience in forming and applying planning principles and process allowed me to contribute insight into the necessities of such a comprehensive

planning document. My experience of theory, practice, and application of planning has allowed me to be a valuable contributor to my team. The CRP program at Cal Poly is designed to turn out public sector city planners. However, as a planner in the private sector I find that the design of a site or community cannot be done in a vacuum. Without my contemporary knowledge of the planning process and its application, my design and planning abilities would be useless.

John: I gained a strong understanding of General Plan and Zoning Ordinance preparation and implementation. The classes and skills that I learned at Cal Poly were very applicable to my first internship and job. In fact, my job with Atascadero was assisting in a comprehensive update of the City's General Plan. So, I got to utilize my skills in my first professional job. I would definitely say that the CRP program gave me a good foundation to build upon in my career.



Figure 2. Carrie Loarie, BSCR Class of 2000

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

Phil: Weaknesses- Not enough experience working with the everyday duties of analyzing a project and writing a professional analysis of it for compliance with a particular code- Being able to create logical findings and conditions. Not enough exposure to the CEQA document and checklist in a genuine project. Strengths- Good design background, good computer skills, good planning and architectural history knowledge, good understanding of working with a tough crew!

Carrie: I strongly encourage the CRP department to continue growing the design courses for planning students. There are few universities in the United States that offer a design based planning program—most are leaning towards policy. I have found that in my profession, I offer a unique skill—the ability to bridge the gap between site planning and architectural design. I hope Poly’s Planning Department can do the same for future CRP graduates.

Nichole: The greatest strength of the CRP program are the professors. Their experience and dedication to planning and the classroom generates practical and invaluable knowledge. Zeljka Howard and Vicente del Rio have left indelible marks on my professional and personal life. Now that I have had brief experience in both the public and private sector, I understand how important the public planning process is. The CRP program is excellent in laying this foundation that is balanced with theory and application. Unfortunately, the focus is so heavily on the public sector practice that community design has fallen at the wayside. We only get a brief taste of this in the second year. Vicente del Rio is such an excellent designer and professor; I feel that the program could really capitalize on his presence by increasing their offering of classes geared toward community and site planning.

John: The strength is that CRP students enter the profession with the technical skills to be productive planners with minimal additional training. The Cal Poly motto of “Learn by Doing” could not be more evident than in the CRP program. I would also have to include the instructors as an asset. As a proud alumnus, I would have to say that there are no weaknesses. However, I would like to see more emphasis on planning theory and community design.

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

Phil: Need more practice, practice, and practice. Theory is relatively easy to learn from a few APA workshops.

Carrie: While I believe that it is important to understand the theory and policies involved in planning, it is also important for students to be able to apply what they are learning to real world experiences. From my experiences, the real world does not lend itself to theoretical solutions. That is why I think the community planning laboratories, amongst others, is an imperative component of the planning program. This course is the true test of the ability to apply theoretical knowledge to a real world exercise.

Nichole: I’m not sure I could repeat planning process and application much more. The mix perfect for generating a solid foundation. Professionally you lean on the practice and application, and question theory more intently. CRP has prepared me with the perfect starting point to build and improve both areas of the profession.

John: When I attended Cal Poly, I would say it was 70% practice and 30% theory. I would like to see something closer to 50/50. I think it is important that CRP graduates are creative problem-solvers that can think and plan on a regional, national and global level. I am concerned that in the development community planners are perceived more as regulators than problem-solvers.

What are the critical knowledge areas for planners entering the field?

Phil: CEQA, CEQA, CEQA, Map Act, Planning and Zoning Law, Real Estate basics.

Carrie: I believe that planners play an important intermediate role in the creation of communities. Therefore, a broad understanding of all the different planning components is important. By no means do I think it is necessary to be the guru of all disciplines. Rather, I believe that a well-rounded planner has the ability to converse about planning law, the environment, social issues, economics, design, architecture, business and marketing—so that they can coordinate ideas and make informed decisions.

Nichole: Land use law, zoning, and public planning are of utmost importance. It would be impossible to work in the public or private sector and not understand these fundamentals as they are used everyday. In the private sector I wish I knew more about the fiscal matters related to housing and land development.

John: CEQA and land use regulation. A planner must know the CEQA process, and understand its effects on community plans and individual projects. Understanding how land uses interface will be important as many communities plan and promote mixed use developments with increased densities to protect open space and agricultural lands.

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

Phil: GIS, Professional technical writing, and of course COMMUNICATION!

Carrie: Since I am a design planner, I believe that basic drawing skills are key. While computer graphics are impressive, the ability to free hand a design in front of a client is often worth more than a Photoshop presentation board. Furthermore, good basic graphic skills and lettering is also crucial if you plan to share your ideas with others.

Nichole: Presentation is a key skill in the private planning sector. Client meeting are basically project presentations.



Figure 3. Nichole Narhi, BSCR P Class of 2004.

Your understanding of the project, its strengths and weaknesses and its correlation to the local planning process are showcased every time you meet with a client. The practice I gained at CRP prepared me to deal with both discussion and criticism.

John: I believe that planners should have good research, writing and presentation skills. These skills are important whether you work for a public agency or a private firm.

What computer applications should planners entering the field know?

Phil: Microsoft PowerPoint, Word, and Excel. As well as ArcView, Photoshop, or similar products.

Carrie: We use AutoCAD and Photoshop on a regular basis.

Nichole: Thankfully my company puts all new hires through an AutoCAD training session. I usually spend 5-7 hours a day, designing and redesigning site plans on AutoCAD. The planning program did not prepare me for the importance of this program. It did prepare me for Photoshop use. As David Stanfield (BSCR P 2004), Mike McKay (BSCR P 2004) and I came into this job, our Photoshop skills far exceed those of our colleagues. We often use the program to render site plans on the computer rather than by hand, and to create presentations. It is a useful program to enhance hand drawings.

John: With the ever expanding role of technology in planning, I would strongly recommend students get experience in GIS and computer-based design before entering the field.

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

Phil: Reality Check- the political process and the difference between good planning theory and political reality.

Carrie: I would argue that the transition was easy—similar to the design labs, I work with innovative and fun personalities everyday and most of my day is spent designing/drawing/rendering. The only difference is that I am getting paid to do something I love! Who can beat that?

Nichole: I guess my biggest challenge was the transition from a “public process city planner” mind frame to a private developer site designer. I struggled at first because I just did not have enough experience in design. Now that I am hitting my six -month mark, I’m feeling more acclimated to the bottom line driven, deadline hitting, site designing niche. Plus, going from the comfort and praise of the academic world to the entry level professional life has quite a few reality checks. Working with amazing people with decades of experience behind them is a humbling thing. It is also an amazing opportunity to continue growing as a planner and as a professional.

John: The most challenging aspect is understanding the “political realities” that often influence the planning process and decision-making. While the CRP program does a very good job of introducing students to social politics, it is nearly impossible to simulate the political atmosphere and influences that come into play in most communities. My advice to anyone entering the profession is to not get emotionally attached to a project or recommendation, but rather to be objective and understand your role in the planning process.

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.

Phil: Dealing with the public sectors ravenous appetite for revenue in the wake of continuous funding reductions. The



Figure 4. John Sholas, BSCR Class of 1987

demand for revenue can sometimes get in the way of good community planning and design. Planners must be able to work within the political reality that is facing us. And additionally affordable housing. The creation of affordable housing for the masses continues to be an incredible challenge for planners. More methods of implementation and neighborhood palatability need to be explored. Poly need to teach students so that they may successfully engage these challenges.

Carrie: Good question. I will say world peace—the constant battle of the haves/have nots, humans/environment, left wing/right wing, etc. If I knew an answer to that, the world wouldn’t still be fighting these dilemmas.

Nichole: The challenge is fighting homogenous development. New Urbanism is exploding in the public and private sectors. Cities are requesting it and builders are exploring it. However, the benefits of New Urbanism have the potential to become the plague of suburbia without ingenuity in design and architecture. As planning begins to take its place in the development world, it is a daily battle to legitimize the professional and help architects and developers understand the vital benefits of good planning and design. A Cal Poly professor once describe a colleague of his as a “recovering architect”, meaning he had come around to the “enlightenment” of planning in architecture. This is the challenge facing planners, to find the balance of design ingenuity in an architecture/developer dominated market that is tempted by the rising tide of New Urbanism. A cookie cutter new urban community could be just as bitter as the suburban tract home. We as planners may be tempted to rest on our laurels as the tide turns toward our champion, New Urbanism. However, we have to continue to infuse this concept with good planning that makes sense for the place, the community, and the time.

John: I believe that regional planning is one of the biggest challenges facing planners over the next decade. Housing, transportation and employment need to be addressed on a regional scale to ensure efficient use of resources and protection of the environment. Cal Poly should continue teaching smart growth principles, and how to effectively implement those principles in urban and suburban settings. There should also be an emphasis on regional planning practices. I am an advocate for smart growth on a regional and local level.

