

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

In this issue FOCUS brings you an exciting interview with four CRP alumni who work for EDAW, a private international design, environment, and planning consulting firm, that is consistently ranked among the world's leading design firms. Nick Haskell (Principal and Studio Co-Leader), Clark Williams (Associate), Colleen Hart (Planner), and Sierra Russell (Planner) are part of EDAW's Planning and Urban Design Studio in the San Francisco office, one of the firm's 25 locations throughout the United States, Asia, Australia, and Europe.

Focus: When did you all graduate from CRP?

Nick Haskell: 1990; Clark Williams: Spring 1995; Colleen Hart: June 2003; Sierra Russell: Spring 2004.

Focus: Tell us about your professional life after you left CRP.

Nick: I have worked full time as a private sector planner since graduation. My early goal was to be a designer, which I did immediately following graduation. However, I was laid off in the early 1990's and "had" to take a job as a policy planner which I stayed at for about five years, then worked briefly for a "boutique" design/planning office. I started with EDAW in 1997. Getting experience with policy and design has been really good for me – while it took a while for me to understand, I finally concluded good design can only be realized if it's based on strong policy.

Clark: Calthorpe Associates, Urban Designer (1995-2000); Moore-Iacofano-Goltsman, Urban Designer (2000-2003); Catalyst, Project Manager (2003-2005); EDAW, Project Manager (2005-Current). AICP Certified, 2000.

Colleen: I have been working for EDAW for two and a half years. I am a project planner and designer, and project manager for both private and public sector clients.

Sierra: I have been working for EDAW since I graduated. My project experience so far has been with both public and private sector clients, and has included strategic land planning, transit-oriented development, policy planning, and master planning projects.

Focus: Did you take any graduate degree? Do you think graduate studies are important to complement undergrad education? If so, should one do them right after school, or a little professional experience before is preferred?

Note: Focus thanks Sierra Russell for her help with this interview happen and for providing all the pictures. We also thank EDAW for the permission to reproduce them.

Nick: I didn't pursue graduate studies after Cal Poly. I think the necessity of graduate studies depends on the individual, their goals and motivation, and the nature of their undergraduate program. I knew what I wanted to do after school and aggressively pursued it. That said, I was fortunate to have had some early pre-graduation experiences which coupled with my BS provided me with some unique skills and the confidence to move ahead. The Cal Poly degree is particularly good because you are taught to think and to do something, and have more than a fundamental grasp on local government planning in California – in other words, if we hire you, we believe you can take on responsibility almost immediately and we can depend on you, and as a studio leader, I like that.

Clark: I have not pursued a graduate degree; however a graduate degree can be beneficial for candidates seeking to pursue more expertise in our broad profession. My personal goals and interests have aligned with the work



Figure 1. CRP Alumni at the EDAW's planning and urban design studio in San Francisco. From left to right: Clark Williams, Sierra Russell, Nick Haskell, and Colleen Hart.

I've been doing. In that respect Cal Poly's motto of "learn by doing" has been my professional motto also.

Colleen: I do not have a Masters Degree. In my situation working for EDAW, I have decided I do not need to enroll in a Masters Program to complement my understanding of planning. I feel that with the Cal Poly CRP Undergrad Program, and my work experience from my internship and here at EDAW, I will continue to learn and grow with more professional experience. I have a great mentor here at EDAW, who has given me the chance to work on a variety of projects to help me find my niche in the wide world of planning.

If I had a different degree and was interested in planning, I would recommend a Masters to get into the field and have a better understanding of it. I also believe that you should "dabble" in the field you are interested in before you jump into a Masters Program. Therefore, I think that one should have a bit of professional experience after undergraduate work before doing more schooling.

Sierra: I do not have a graduate degree and I do not think it is necessary to enter the field of planning with a Master's Degree if you have a Bachelors' Degree in City and Regional Planning. I felt prepared to enter a professional level position after I graduated, particularly because I had working experience before graduating as a planning intern for the City of Paso Robles, and also

for KTGy, Inc. I felt fortunate for having both these working experiences. Working with the City of Paso Robles over an extended period of time complemented my education with practical real-world experience, and also gave me a platform to go into the private sector. I don't think I would have the job I have now without both of those work experiences. For now, my career goals are to continue my professional experience, and I don't feel the need to get a Master's to continue to progress in my career.

Focus: Tell us a little about your job at EDAW. Tell us a bit about the projects that you did here you most enjoyed.

Nick: I'm a principal with EDAW, San Francisco, and co-lead the planning and urban design studio. I'm involved with hiring, marketing, management, and project work. We try and maintain an almost even balance of public and private sector clients, and our staff includes policy and design planners. Our private sector jobs include infill neighborhoods and larger master planned communities, for national homebuilders and developers, and small property owners and developers. For these projects we prepare overall concept plans, development yield studies, and refined neighborhood/district design. For the public sector we predominantly prepare specific plans and transit-oriented development plans. The setting for these jobs is diverse, ranging from thriving

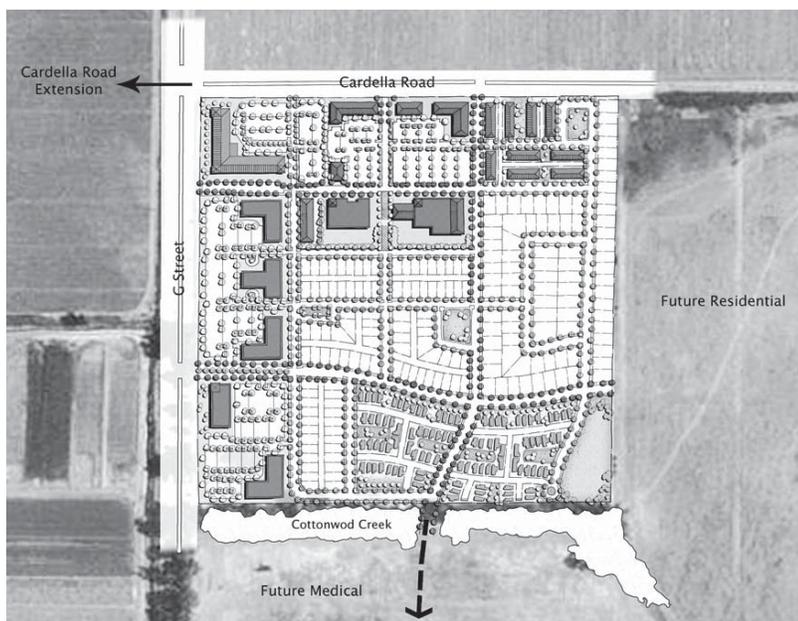


Figure 2.
Merced Mixed Use Development,
Merced, CA., 2005 - on going.

downtowns, to rural small downtowns, and neglected city neighborhoods.

I really enjoy having a mix of projects and challenges. We regularly work on projects all over the western United States, and have done work in the Philippines, Middle East, and Asia. Even now, I'm always excited to take on new projects, like winning work. I'm part of a really strong firm and team, and frequently work with a group of really smart and collaborative consultants. This combination of factors ensures our work to be interesting and never predictable. Who would have thought planning could be intense and rewarding? - - It can be, and it is.

Clark: I am a project manager working on a variety of planning and urban design projects. Most projects are residential master plans and mixed-use master plans.

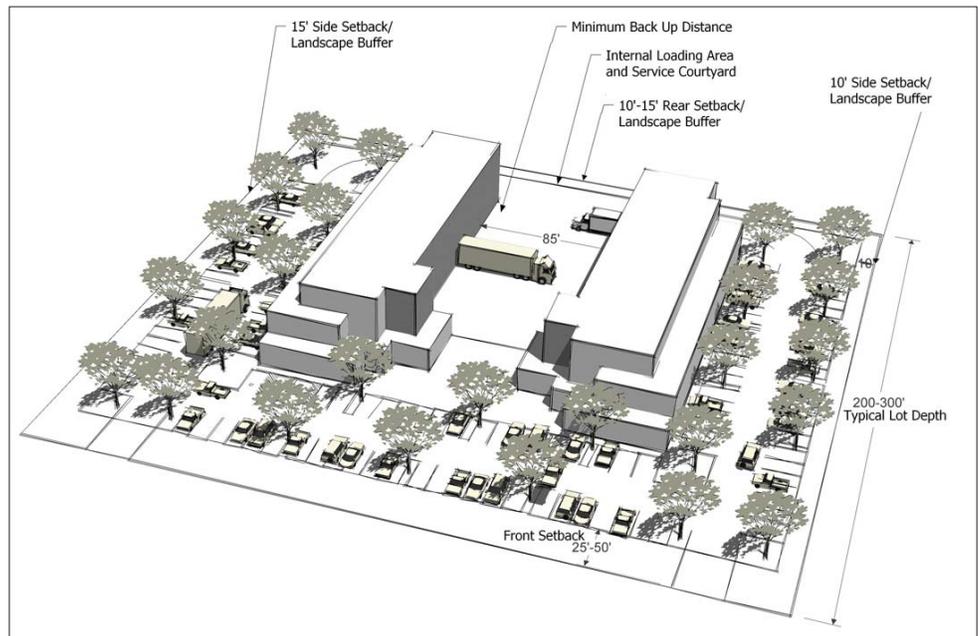
Colleen: My project work focuses on large scale master planned communities, physical land planning, yield studies and analysis, "sense of place" and community character analysis, new residential, commercial and neighborhood developments, infill and urban design projects, and strategic site analysis. Currently (2005) – I have been working on Master Planned Communities for some of the largest home builders in the Nation – Pulte, Lennar, KB Homes, The Grupe Company, Pardee Homes, and Bridge Housing – helping them

create livable communities with neighborhood crafting elements that make the plan a desirable place to be. My principles include creating enduring solutions by blending traditional planning methods with forward-looking visions. New urbanism ideas and sustainable development techniques area also integrated within my creative vision.

Sierra: Since with EDAW, I have worked on a diverse set of projects, widely ranging in scale and focus. Although all projects have been valuable in my professional growth and learning, two projects come to mind that I have particularly enjoyed: a strategic land planning project and a transit-oriented development project.

The first involves a large area of land holdings in Florida, which we have spent the last four months preparing a long-term implementation strategy encouraging immediate development, as well as strategies for long-term quality investments. I think what I've liked most about this project is that it has given me exposure to a wide range of disciplines and the opportunity to learn about large scale regional planning efforts. I also think projects of this scale allow unique opportunities to distribute development in a manner that encourages greater resource conservation, while still serving a regional growth demand with the creation of more sustainable and compact communities.

Figure 3.
Woodland Park Specific Plan,
Woodland Park, CA.,
2002 - on going.



The second project is the preparation of a Transit-Oriented Development Specific Plan. We are currently looking at ways to intensify development around a BART (Bay Area Rapid Transit) station located in a business park for several key properties near the station, without exceeding the City's housing cap and still meeting the goals of all stakeholders involved, including the property owners. Although there are many competing interests involved, in addition to potential barriers presented by local politics and recently publicized criticism of TOD development, I like the complexity that is presented to us as planners from these challenges.

Focus: *Do you think planners need a design education? How much graphic thinking you do?*

Nick: Yes. Even if you never pick up a pen as a planner/designer, you will very likely find yourself evaluating, reviewing or preparing policies for development. At the very least, your credibility as an analyst will be enhanced if you know what you are looking at. At best, you will find yourself designing or making critical decisions about someone else's design. A common stereotype is that planners aren't designers, and yet planners are usually those informing elected and appointed officials about design. I don't think all planners need to be designers, but I do believe that planners should not be intimidated by the graphic aptitude or powerful attitudes or convictions of other design professionals. We need to be just as confident and committed. Having at least some design competence greatly enhances the likelihood of truly collaborative involvement on projects.

I draw a distinction between "graphic thinking" and being a designer. Thinking graphically is useful and important when preparing a presentation or report, but understanding "design" is useful when designing places and influencing change. About half of our team does no literal "design" at all, yet these people regularly manage projects and designers and are directly responsible for the preparation of plans which often include intense design solutions which must be credible.

Clark: It's critical that planners have an education in design. Planner's need to not only be exposed to design but have a critical eye towards the understanding good design. My time is divided almost evenly between project management and design.

Colleen: I do believe that planners need a design education. Even if they work in the public sector and focus on policy

work such as General Plans and Specific Plans, they still need to understand what makes a good plan. Also, when working on design guidelines, it is essential to know and understand what planning elements make a community work. These include design standards, compatible land uses, diversity, open space and recreation, pedestrian scale, etc. In other words, even if you don't draw it, you need to understand it to apply it.

Sierra: A lot. Graphics are important, and although I don't think graphics should ever supersede content, they are extremely important in communicating ideas. I think clear and concise graphics, in addition to understandable and logical writing, are key in being successful as a planner. I also think it depends on your professional goals. Some people enjoy the design aspects of planning more, and in that case they should pursue a more intense design education. Others prefer the policy aspects -- either way, a planner should know what aspects form a good design, and how it should be graphically communicated.

Focus: *What do you remember most about CRP? Which were your best moments, and your worst?*

Nick: I really liked the 200 design series (in hindsight), third year, and a 400 series design aesthetics class I took with Leo Jacobsen. I only figured out years later that the 200 series (at the time) was largely based on the Bauhaus, and while at the time seemed abstract and not too applicable, was formative in broadening my perspective as a designer. We did quite a bit of strict two and three-dimensional design of shapes and objects. Our teacher (Joe Kourakis) pushed us and expected quality design and craftsmanship. The rigor from this has carried with me.

I enjoyed third year because it was big and felt important – we did a community plan for Cambria, which was packed with drama and challenges; in many ways not unlike a "real" project. This was also when strong friendships were formed and we began to figure out what we might actually like to do as planners. The 400 (arch) series design class was good because it was far reaching and complex – we watched hundreds of slides of places and things and talked about them. This was a very small class and for a designer, very self indulgent – we talked and wrote about design. Fourth year (CRP) was a letdown, and compared to third year slow paced and dull. Our projects were rambling and in recollection, almost completely free of focus.

Clark: I remember the third year studio as one of my favorite classes. It was an exposure to a real design problem, working in a team, and the realities of working within the regulatory framework of a local municipality. Paul Wack’s classes were always the right mix of fun and learning.

Colleen: I remember the professors who were passionate about their work – Vicente del Rio, Paul Wack, and Paul Crawford. It was great to learn from people who had experience professionally practicing and undertaking real-world planning projects. Best moments – coming back from my internship one summer and actually understanding what planning was. The little bit of real world experience really made a difference in the way I viewed planning from then on. Worst moments: drawing for hours on mylar with rapidographs, then realizing in the working world, we don’t use either one – just tracing paper and sign pens. Also, I had a few frustrated professors who took it out in the students – that should never happen.

Sierra: I remember most working with a great bunch of people, professors and students alike, and appreciating

being in a program where I could actually get to know the professors, especially those who were genuinely dedicated to the students (Vicente del Rio, Paul Wack, Zeljka Howard, among others). Best moments were studying abroad, marveling at how well our CRP 411 group worked together, and the APA Washington DC conference. Worst moments were doing repetitive and tedious design work for many hours in my first design course, and working on a never-ending senior project. I should have narrowed the scope of my senior project, and I ended up working on it until the last minute.

Focus: *What do you think CRP did right in your education, and what do you think could be improved? How does your education reflect in your work?*

Nick: The CRP program was (and I think still is) very good in teaching the fundamental elements of planning, the ability to take responsibility and preparing people to start their careers as more than competent generalists (based on two of our Cal Poly hires over the last three years, who are both doing very well). This basic characteristic of Cal Poly students may explain the disappointment (possibly since changed) associated with fourth year.

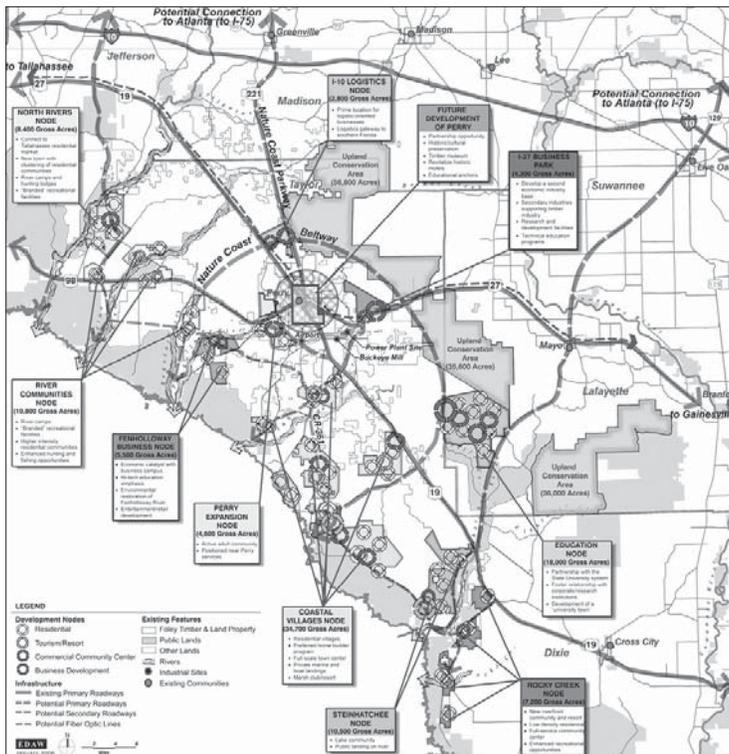


Figure 4. Strategic Land Plan, Florida, 2005-2006.

No matter your core area of interest, after third year, students are ready for something challenging, and when I was there, this was not the case. I'm not sure what happens in fourth year now, but it might want to be either more focused, such as preparation of a specific plan, or more specialized study such as transit oriented development, neighborhood or district planning, green communities, or area revitalization – just something challenging and interesting.

Experiences gained at Cal Poly comes to light most vividly in my work ethos, through my long time willingness to take on new challenges with the confidence that one way or other, I will be able to figure them out. While clearly not only normative, this bit of willingness has influenced my career and opened the door for an array of opportunities. The President of our firm recently commented to me “don't be prepared, be ready” and I think that is indicative of the best Cal Poly offers.

Clark: I enjoyed the opportunity to take architecture classes and interact with students in other majors. Also the importance of internships is a key element of the coursework. I would encourage more interdisciplinary projects.

Colleen: Learning the basics was great. It would have been nice to have classes or even one class which would focus solely on specific land uses and community design and how to make them work – commercial, retail, office, streetscape, residential low density, high density, open space – then wrap it up on how to actually put it together in a plan. Also, I do quite a bit of product and lotting analysis... We were never taught how to create neighborhoods. I remember in school I did a plan with a single-loaded block in the middle of a residential development... that's a huge no-no.

Sierra: I think the CRP program excellently prepared me with the basic practical knowledge and technical skills I needed to enter in the field after graduating. I feel very fortunate that I was able to jump right in to the career that I did without a master's degree.

There should be greater flexibility in the context and scale of planning projects for the community design courses required. For instance, students should have the opportunity to work on projects more urban in nature if they want to, or focus on projects in rural areas dealing more with environmental conservation

and impacts to the natural setting. Also, group projects are great learning experiences, but they also can result in an uneven workload across the group. I think students should be given more opportunities to work individually to explore their interests. I also think there could be more theory classes offered. My education is reflected in my work everyday. CEQA, eminent domain, reading site plans, the Ahwahnee Principles, the seven mandated elements of the General Plan.... Those pesky CRP facts seem to all become useful at some point.

Focus: *Do you think CRP does the right mix between theory and practice?*

Nick: No. While I am a huge advocate for learning “the basics”, directly useful when finding and keeping a job, having a better understanding of planning theory would make for stronger students. During my second job, I worked with several Cal grads, and while I knew much more than them about CEQA/OPR, they were much bigger thinkers. The irony here is that during tough times, I saw many of these people get laid off, and I think I kept a job because I could easily shift between projects and work tasks. That said I sometimes felt like a bit of an intellectual outsider, not fully grasping why they had such commitment to their perspectives and the apparent compulsion to implement an idea rather than a policy. Read and understand Jane and Allan Jacobs! (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities, and Great Streets*).

Clark: Yes. There are always new theories and skills to learn and it is impossible to master these in an academic environment. The proof is in the workplace and the department provided me with the skills and knowledge to immediately be a productive team member in a high-pressure office straight out of school.

Colleen: Yes. This gives students the chance to figure out what they are interested in – design or policy, or both. I do believe that in the last 2 years of the program you should be able to choose a more design-specific focus curriculum, or a more policy driven one.

Sierra: In hindsight and when comparing my own educational experiences with graduates from other planning programs, I really feel CRP emphasizes practice too much over theory. Being a student is a time to develop your own philosophy and theoretical understanding that will form the platform for your professional practice. Being well-studied in the history,

theories, and trends of design and development are as integral as learning how to draw or write a staff report. It wasn't until I studied abroad that I learned about twentieth century planning and architectural history. Although this is just my own personal example, and I know that theory and history classes are offered and required in the CRP program, I do feel more theory should be incorporated into CRP courses.

Focus: *What are the critical knowledge areas and skills for planners today?*

Nick: Planners need to be solid generalists with very good writing and problem solving skills, and should have a core area of interest, not the other way around. What specifically comes to mind is the frequency with which I see resumes that someone is really good at GIS. While useful, this or any other specific technical competence is not why our studio hires people. We have other experts within the firm who do GIS (and are really experts), visual simulations, or other technical fields. They are usually hired to focus on those areas of expertise. We need people who can appreciate and understand this, but really we need people who can do planning.

Although possibly obvious, people should be good at Word, Excel, Photoshop, Illustrator and InDesign, but again, don't need to be "experts" at any of them – they

will learn more than they thought possible working with us for just a few months. As for AutoCad, we really don't need experts, but a basic understanding is useful for people who want to get involved with more intense design projects.

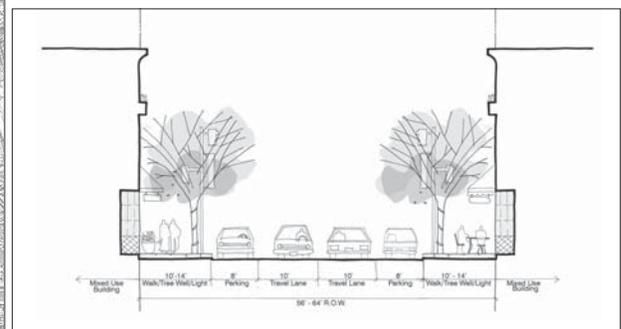
Finally, if someone wants to be a designer, they need to be able to draw – specifically layout through free hand ink work. Almost all of our design work involves huge amounts of drawing, which is scanned and colored electronically. Like technology, people who draw almost always get better after only a few months in our studio. I still spend a good deal of my time working with our new designers explaining the theory and technical aspects of our work. At the end of the day, we want each of our team members at all levels to be important contributors that we can depend on – we are not about the traditional apprenticeship.

Clark: Understanding the regulatory framework of land use, economic, and financial realities of development, sustainable concepts, and the importance of community involvement are just a few that come to mind.

Colleen: For my position at EDAW, I need to understand how a community works. What makes a great place? This requires knowing great places and actually going out to see them. Seeing them first hand gives you a sense of



Figure 5 & 6. The Sanctuary Master Plan, Stockton CA., 2003 - on going.



human scale rather than looking at it on a map or plan. We need to know where to go to find regulations, zoning, and constraints, and then how to apply them to the plans we create – whether they are specific plans, master development plans, or design guidelines. The computer skills that I would recommend are: Adobe PhotoShop, Adobe Acrobat, Adobe InDesign, AutoCAD (how to read files, scale, revise plans), Adobe Illustrator, and other basics like Excel, Word, and PowerPoint.

Sierra: These are in no particular order: hand-drawn graphics; understanding of 3-D applications and how they can assist us in planning projects; principles of new urbanism, sustainable design, and smart growth; and local government planning and the development review process. Some basic applications I would recommend using and that I probably use the most are Photoshop, AutoCAD, Illustrator, and InDesign.

Focus: *What would you recommend to someone just starting his/her professional career?*

Nick: I suggest that to the extent possible, they be open-minded and stick with it. As hard to believe as it may sound and I think it frequently does, doing a good job on a first tedious (or at least non-glamorous) task does much in building the rest of the team's confidence in that person. We don't expect our new team members to win work or run big projects – we are still trying to figure out what they are good at and like to do. As we learn more about each other their responsibility increases and often dramatically. Being sloppy on an apparently minor task can result in big problems, ranging from embarrassment to project trouble, to unfortunately steering important work away from that person – not good for anybody. Two positive examples of Cal Poly graduates sticking with it come to mind.

In one case, our team member has been on a master planned community project for the last three years. She started doing basic color ups and area takeoffs, and is now essentially running neighborhood design, and dealing directly with the client's Director of Development. In another case our planner's early tasks on a TOD/suburban office park transformation, began with her doing very tedious APN/FAR/Excel work. The work she prepared (and did rigorously) is being used as the baseline data for the traffic engineer for modeling. I have complete confidence and trust in both of their

work, and we embrace them as integral team members. So, don't give up, be patient, don't whine too much, and do good stuff – opportunities will follow.

Clark: Stay motivated to constantly learn and increase your skill sets. Use your Cal Poly education as a foundation for your career. Cal Poly offers a good breadth of academic knowledge, but it will be up to you to develop an area of expertise. Work on your communication skills. One advantageous skill set planners have is our ability to fill the role of the generalist. That can allow us to communicate and collaborate successfully with architects, designers, developers, and citizens.

Colleen: Don't expect to know how to start planning right away. There is SO much to learn. Go out and explore. Find places, communities, plazas, parks, residential neighborhoods that you like. Take pictures. The more you get out there and find good and bad examples of places, the better designer you will become, and the more ideas you will have to create a great place.

Sierra: Look for a job where you will get experience with a wide variety of types of projects. Don't get frustrated when you realize you can't jump right in as project manager right out of school. Know that even with a degree from a very strong planning program and any internships you've done, you will still have a lot to learn and it will take a lot of time to build up the necessary skills and knowledge to manage projects. And always continue to explore and pursue areas that intrigue you.