

MITIGATION PLANNING

THE PATH OF A CRP ALUMNA

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As the State of California and the whole country becomes more aware of the need to prepare cities to cope with and to recover from natural disasters, the need for specialized planners increases. Corinne Rosenblum, a graduate of the MCRP program class of 2005, writes about her professional path in this important area of planning in which the CRP Department has been focusing on.

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I find the life and times of CRP alumni to be fascinating and hope you will find my story interesting. Before I tell you about my life now, there are a few things you should know about my pre-graduation experiences.

After completing an undergraduate degree in Environmental and Resource Sciences at UC Davis in 1999, I jetted off to Boston, Mass. with my good friend, Amber. We needed to try a new coast for a while. I landed a job with a GIS consulting company and quickly learned the trials and tribulations of creating digital data. After a couple years, I was managing projects and coordinating with local communities to build their GIS, training them to use it as a tool in their regular planning tasks.

At that time, I had no idea what a planning department's purpose was. With four years of GIS (technical) consulting, I realized I could add much more value to the world if I understood what my clients really did with GIS. Thus, my path led to Cal Poly. I considered two schools for graduate study: Tufts University in Boston and Cal Poly. During my visit to Cal Poly, CRP department head Bill Siembieda told me that Cal Poly has a 100 percent placement rate (meaning every graduate gets a job) and that if I wanted to work in California, I should have a California planning education. I was sold! You'll find it ironic that after only nine months of working in California, I moved back to Boston, but that part of the story comes later.

MCRP Days

Thank goodness for the CRP department's push to decide thesis topics early in the curriculum. During my second quarter as a master's student, having just realized how cities function (i.e. I never knew about city council, planning boards, etc) and that people were actually making decisions about life and development in a given neighborhood, the San Simeon Earthquake of 2003 occurred. I thought to myself, "If we have people that decide on building codes and regulations, zoning, public safety, etc., why do we use buildings that we know are not seismically retrofitted for earthquakes?" I have known since first grade that California is prone to earthquakes; it wasn't news.

It seemed to me that enough time had gone by, and enough devastating earthquakes had damaged the state, that our local cities and towns would have implemented means to make buildings safer by now. I took this on as a thesis topic and researched the recovery process in Paso Robles, comparing it to the recovery process from a prior earthquake in Napa.

Through this exercise, Ken Topping, my professor and thesis supervisor, introduced me to the small world of Hazard Mitigation Planners. Sometimes they are referred to as Disaster Mitigation Planners, but we must keep in mind that hazards cause disasters. The idea of

Figure 1
Corinne is happy in her new work as a hazard mitigation planner.



mitigation planning is to mitigate enough of the hazard that the disaster never happens. Disaster refers to the damaged structures and destroyed human lives that result from the hazard. Without the human component, a tornado in a desolate rain forest wouldn't really be considered a disaster. It would just be Mother Nature taking her course. It's when we humans are affected by these hazards that we call them "disasters".

This is what I learned in my research. Professor Topping gave me a small role in a Disaster Preparedness seminar, and this put me in front of the room, giving me a chance to introduce myself to the "disaster planners." I networked at the APA conference and even participated in the annual APA "Disaster Planners Dinner." One thing I can attest to is that disaster planners like to have a good time!

In the end, I feel lucky that I was able to focus my planning studies in this small niche of the planning realm. It accomplished my initial goal for planning school, which was to understand how to be involved in my community in a meaningful way, and now it lets me help make communities safer around the world.

Post-Graduation

As you can imagine, with my previous work experience and the practical experience I gained at Cal Poly, as I neared the graduation date, job opportunities were flowing into my mailbox. It felt like I interviewed with every company in California that does planning. The "dream" companies at the time for me were EDAW and Sasaki Associates. I really liked the products from both of these companies. Unfortunately, neither of them wanted to talk to me seriously. I like to think it just wasn't the right timing.

I thoroughly enjoyed my talks with LSA in Berkeley, and still think that it would be a wonderful place to work. I spoke with a few companies in Boston (VHB and Goody Clancy), keeping the option to move back east open. In the end, my goal was to try something in the "corporate America" category. I had come from a small consulting firm into graduate school, and had done my internships in the public sector. I was ready to try the part of the working world that I hadn't yet tasted.

During a career fair at Cal Poly, I stumbled across STANTEC. No one in the department had heard of them. They were able to provide endless opportunities for me through all the different services they offer. In the Sacramento office alone, there are architects, landscape architects, and many different kinds of engineers. It was exactly the kind of company I wanted to land in, to understand the corporate environment and see how the different professions work together on development projects.

Nine months later, I received a call from Scott Choquette, a mitigation planner with DEWBERRY whom I'd met at the last APA conference. DEWBERRY wasn't on my interviewing radar at the APA conference. Lucky for me, Scott saw my talents during my brief role in the workshop and introduced himself. We kept in touch, as all good networking consultants do, and when he had a position in Boston open, he gave me a call. Apparently my valuable qualification is the combination of knowing what mitigation planning is and being able to communicate effectively.

It didn't matter that I didn't have professional experience in "disaster planning," he was willing to train me on that aspect. He was grateful to find a person with the understanding of the concept for mitigation planning, and with a knowledge of the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. I jumped at the opportunity to move to Boston. It didn't take long to realize how much I missed the seasons and the advantages of living in a big city (such as public transportation). The streets and sidewalks are covered in ice as I write this and I love it.

Life at Dewberry

I have been at DEWBERRY in Boston for over a year now. My title is Hazard Mitigation Planner, and my responsibilities vary among three types of jobs. My primary duty is to support the hazard mitigation planning practice. My secondary duty is to support flood mapping work. My tertiary duty is to support GIS services.

Hazard Mitigation Planning

Dewberry works with communities (who are usually funded through grants from FEMA) to write hazard mitigation plans pursuant to the Disaster Mitigation Act of 2000. Thus far, I've been involved in plans across the country including the following: Costilla County, Colo.; Dekalb County, Ga.; Colleges of the Fenway, Boston, Mass.; Santa Barbara School Districts in California; Mississippi state; and South Dakota state.

A FEMA approved mitigation plan makes the community eligible for Hazard Mitigation Grant Program funding and Pre-Disaster Mitigation funding. Mitigation plans are relevant for every level of community from the state level to the county level to the city and township level. Universities and colleges are also eligible to submit mitigation plans, as are Native American tribes. Other funding is available in the wake of a disaster, but these are funding sources to help communities implement projects designed to reduce losses from future hazards.

Many of the hazard mitigation plans address man-made hazards in addition to natural hazards. Natural hazards generally of concern are things like floods, hurricanes, severe winter weather, earthquakes, strong wind, etc. Man-made hazards include hazardous material spills, rioting, terrorism, nuclear plant explosions, etc. DEWBERRY has many methods of researching past hazards and analyzing the risk for future hazards. Any given hazard mitigation plan takes approximately one year to complete. So, I'm still learning the details of each step in the process.

It is interesting to see how the planning principles I've learned, and the guidelines from FEMA, actually play out with the politics of getting a plan approved to be eligible for funding. Money talks!

Flood Mapping

A large part of Dewberry's business is doing contractual work for FEMA as part of FEMA's map modernization program. FEMA's goal is to upgrade all of the nation's Flood Insurance Rate Maps to a digital base.

This means converting the existing paper maps into GIS format. FEMA, with the help of private contractors, has developed a set of standards for these maps so that every community submits a database in the same format. Over the past year, I've been learning these standards, the process for digital conversion, and the GIS tools developed to assist in the production efforts.

As part of this business, I learned that there is a professional certification to be a floodplain manager. Thanks to support and training from my co-workers, I am now a Certified Floodplain Manager. Getting the certification involved studying the process and requirements of FEMA's National Flood Insurance Program and passing a test.

Basically, it proves that I understand how to read the Flood Insurance Rate Maps and that I understand the national requirements and guidelines with regard to development in designated floodplains. I'm

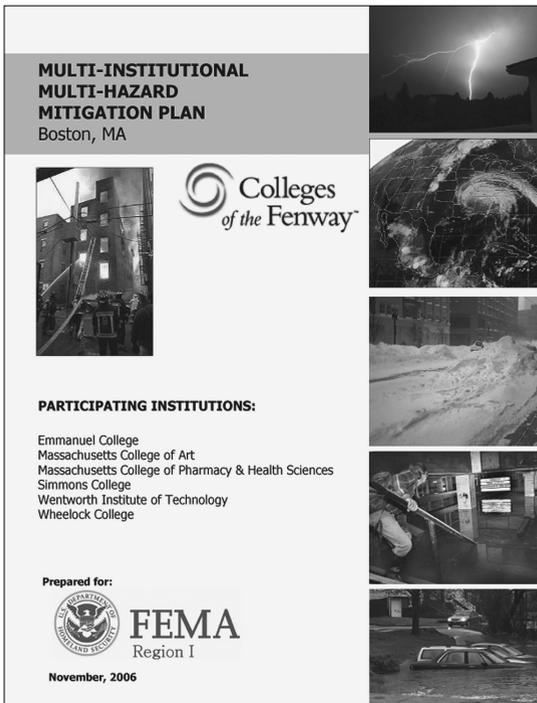


Figure 2
The cover of a recent
ulti-hazard mitigation
plan, an example of
Corinne's work.

looking forward to my first annual floodplain manager conference this coming summer! It will definitely be a different change of pace from the APA conferences.

Both hazard mitigation planning and flood mapping have required public participation processes where I am able to use my Cal Poly training to interact with the public and build consensus among stakeholder groups.

GIS Services

Dewberry has a 50-person department dedicated to providing GIS services as a single contract to clients as well as for the other disciplines within the firm. Obviously, the floodplain mapping work requires a lot of collaboration with the GIS group and use of GIS tools. Aside from that work, I assist the engineering staff in my office as needed and support the GIS group, lending a hand when I can.

Balancing Various Responsibilities

The reason for being well versed in the three service lines of hazard mitigation planning, floodplain mapping, and GIS is so that I can contribute where the work is needed. Depending on the kinds of projects that come in, or that our clients need, my workload varies on a weekly basis.

Corinne's Advice to Planning Students

The other night, as I was discussing this article with a good friend of mine, she asked me if I would have my current job if I hadn't gone to graduate school.

The answer is clearly no. My experience at Cal Poly opened doors and introduced me to people I would not have found without going to graduate school and learning about planning. The hands-on experience I gained through our class projects and my internships is truly invaluable. It was that experience (which seemed limited to me) in conjunction with the standard skill set of being able to communicate effectively and perform in a professional manner that landed me the job I have today.

My advice to the students looking for jobs is to meet as many people as possible. Talk to companies and cities anywhere that seem interesting in order to get a feel for what it's like to work there. Even if there are no open positions at the time, most people love to do informational interviews and "show off" their daily duties or the company they are proud to work for. The connections you make in informational interviews or any interview are valuable in the long term. Networking, and knowing people in the right places, is key to finding a group of people you are happy to work with and for.

Another tip for interviewing: don't be modest. No one else is going to sell your skills like you can. Talk it up! Show that you're confident in your abilities, be honest about your experiences, but be your own advertisement. It's hard for a lot of people, but it works. Employers want confident people who know how to solve problems.

For those students not quite ready to interview yet, it's not too early to think about it. In every course, look for the experience you can pull into your portfolio. Build your portfolio up over time. Keep extra copies of your completed reports and plans handy. Interviewers often like to see samples of writing

skills. It's not too early to start meeting companies at places like the APA conference. Most people love talking to students. Just ask them about their jobs, find out what their daily lives are like. This will give you a better idea of what you want to strive for when the time comes.

Finally, be flexible. Keep in mind that any private firm will be looking for projects that make money. Having a multitude of skills and the willingness to work on a variety of projects can make you a valuable asset to a consulting firm with broad services. Your job description will most likely change over time as the world evolves and demands change. Keep an eye out, keep learning, and embrace change.

Conclusion

All in all, I am pleased with my path and where I am in my career at this point. I have grand plans of moving up in the world. I'm not sure where "up" on the corporate ladder is yet, but I'm learning more everyday. That's the exciting thing about working for the federal government. There are always regulations to learn about! At the end of the day, I still dream about being on the city council or town selectman's board of a small New England town. Some towns in New England do everything by vote at an official Town Meeting. It would be fun to moderate that meeting! I just have to find the right town and then I'll let my political wings spread.

I always love to talk to Cal Poly students (or alumni). If you would like to reach me, please do not hesitate to e-mail me at <crosenblum@dewberry.com>.