

Conversations with Alumni

Spotlight on Sierra Russell

Bachelor of Science in City and Regional Planning, Cal Poly, 2004;
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FOCUS: *When did you graduate from CRP? Can you talk a little about your time with us?*

I graduated in June 2004. My graduating class was very close with each other as well as the faculty in the CRP program. I was the first CRP student to study abroad in Rio de Janeiro thanks to Professor Vicente del Rio's encouragement. I had an incredible time and it was the highlight of my undergraduate experience. I also was a planning intern for the City of Paso Robles Community Development Department during my CRP studies, which was memorable due to the relationships I made with City staff, and the interesting downtown development and planning projects occurring throughout the City.

FOCUS: *Were there any special moments or any "career changing" revelations during that time?*

I remember a land use attorney visiting my land use law class and talking about the legal issues she dealt with on a daily basis. She was incredibly sharp and I remember thinking I would like to do what she did. However, I didn't want to go to law school at the time because I was excited to work in planning and start a career. I wanted to explore my options in planning before turning to a graduate program. I'm glad I didn't go straight to law school and worked professionally for a number of years first. I use my planning education and planning work experiences on a daily basis and they have helped me be successful in my current career.

FOCUS: *You have had an exemplar career both at Cal Poly and after you graduate. What was your trajectory after you received your planning degree? When did you realize that you wanted to pursue a law degree?*

After graduating from Cal Poly, I worked as a planner for a company in San Francisco known as EDAW, which later merged and now is AECOM. I helped develop and write Specific Plans, TOD plans, and other types of policy plans and completed urban design work such as designing master planned communities and streetscapes. I decided the design world was not the best fit for me and wanted experience



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working in the public sector, so I applied for and got a position as Associate Planner for the City of Sausalito. It was extremely rewarding and eventually led me to decide to go to law school. As the Associate Planner, I frequently interacted with lawyers and worked closely with the City Attorney. Working with her and helping manage controversial disputes between neighbors, I realized that I wanted to be advocating for one side or the other rather than being the neutral planner helping manage the dispute.

I applied for law school and selected the University of Denver. At the time, it was a tough decision to leave the Bay Area and a career that I really enjoyed, but it turned out to be the right move. I went to law school with a very directed goal to work in land use and real estate law. I knew I wanted to use my planning degree and experiences, and in hindsight, this direction helped me be more successful in finding a job in a difficult economic time. Employers liked that I had solid work experience, and even more that my prior work experience was directly applicable and would help me be a better real estate practitioner. I was a summer associate for the Denver firm Faegre & Benson (that later merged and now is Faegre Baker Daniels LLP). After graduation, I worked at Faegre Baker Daniels for almost two years in the Denver and Boulder offices. I changed firms at the end of last year and now I am working at Hogan Lovells US LLP.

FOCUS: *Can you describe briefly the most interesting planning works you were involved with?*

In San Francisco, I worked on a number of interesting planning projects including a redevelopment proposal for Japantown, a transit-oriented development in Pleasanton, and developing a master development plan for a 100,000 acre project in Florida. In Sausalito, my most rewarding project was leading a project to install solar panels on city hall and another city building. It was rewarding to work with a diverse group of community residents and leaders through difficult negotiations to achieve a positive result.

FOCUS: *What is your current job. What is your title and position*

in the organization? What are your primary responsibilities, and what type of work do you get involved with?

Currently I am an Associate for Hogan Lovells US LLP, which is the seventh largest law firm in the world and has 47 offices worldwide. I practice commercial real estate and land use law as part of the firm's Corporate Group. I work on commercial leasing, acquisitions and divestments, real estate finance, brokerage issues, construction and development contracts, and local government entitlement and permitting issues. Essentially I work on anything related to land so the types of projects I work on are diverse. My practice is very Colorado focused, which is great given the interesting and rapid development occurring throughout Colorado, and in particular, in Denver. We represent a number of governmental entities and developers in Denver, so I work on interesting local redevelopment and new development issues. I am also working on a pro bono matter for the Children's Museum in Denver by assisting with real estate issues related to its expansion.

FOCUS: *Can you talk about some of the most exciting works you have been involved with lately?*

A large portion of my work is for our energy clients. Right now I am helping manage the development of four large wind farm projects in Colorado that in total cover over 130,000 acres. We assist with everything from the initial corporate acquisition of the project to obtaining all necessary entitlements through the local County government. Once completed, the projects will collectively produce more than 1,000 MW of energy, so it is exciting to be a part of something that is advancing renewable energy in Colorado. While at Faegre Baker Daniels last year, I participated in a pro bono human rights project and traveled to Morocco to complete interviews with NGOs in Rabat and Casablanca. It was fascinating working with translators to conduct the interviews and to learn about the various social issues facing Morocco.

FOCUS: *How did your BCRP education reflect in your career? Do you feel that the classes you took and the skills you learned at Cal Poly were useful?*

Yes, every day I use my planning degree and apply things I learned in the CRP program. The CRP program provided a number of practical skills that I still use to this day, such as negotiating, understanding how to read maps and surveys, navigating the structure of local government zoning, codes, and plans, efficiently completing research on real property, and understanding the various players in land use development. These are all things I was first exposed to as a CRP major and are integral to my job.

FOCUS: *What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of our program?*

I think the strength of the CRP program is it provides practical skills that are immediately useful after graduation. There are

very few universities where you can graduate already able to efficiently complete day-to-day tasks in a professional planning position. The CRP program prepared me to be useful immediately, which is why I was able to get a job right out of college at a competitive firm in San Francisco. Perhaps a weakness is not having a strong alumni program that engages alumni with current students. I think it would be interesting to pair up alumni with students that have matching goals. These relationships could even be long distance as communications could occur through email, Skype, or otherwise. Another way the CRP program could improve is to focus on writing skills such as through advanced writing classes (although perhaps the CRP program does this now). I think writing skills are important and often overlooked at the college level when advanced writing can make students more competitive in graduate programs and in their careers.

FOCUS: *From your experience, which are the critical knowledge areas for young planners? And for those particularly interested in following your steps into law?*

For young planners, I think the critical areas of knowledge are strong writing and oral communication skills, being able to read maps and drawings, working on actual projects or doing internships to gain tangible experience that will translate to a future job, and of course, how to read a zoning code. For any young planner interested in law, writing and oral communication skills are extremely important, so I would suggest doing whatever you can to improve these during your undergraduate coursework to help prepare you for law school. Also, analytical skills are important, so take courses that require you to review complicated fact patterns and write organized analyses.

FOCUS: *What was the most challenging aspect of moving from the academic to the professional environment?*

I don't remember this being too challenging, perhaps because I had already worked quite a bit during college, so being in an office environment was not new to me. I would say learning how to navigate office dynamics and/or internal bureaucracies is probably the most challenging thing as a young professional new to his or her career. This obviously can't be taught in school, but doing internships will really prepare you to transition into a full time professional environment.

FOCUS: *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 be successful and contribute to the community?*

I think one challenge is promoting women. While this may be more of an issue in the legal field than in the planning field, in general (from what I have seen in my experiences) there are few women in development and real estate. I see this changing now with younger generations moving into real estate professions and older generations leaving, but there is still a lot that universities and companies can do to promote women to achieve higher level positions. There is still clearly a gap when

the majority of college students are women, but these numbers are not translating through in the professional world.

Another challenge for planning is continuing to advance denser mixed-use development and creating affordable housing options. In Denver, one of our biggest problems is the lack of willingness of developers to build multi-family condominium housing. This leads to a lack of affordable housing and drives up the price of housing to unaffordable levels. There is a coalition working on this issue in Denver that has identified that Colorado laws related to owners' associations and the prevalence of construction defect litigation are two factors contributing to this problem, which is an interesting example of when legal reform can help solve planning problems. The need to promote dense multi-family and mixed use development is an issue throughout the U.S., not just in Colorado, and this problem has to be addressed on multiple levels. Anything we can do to reduce our footprint by creating denser urban environments with greater public transit options is extremely important.

FOCUS: *Is there anything else you would like to add that could inspire students and young professionals?*

Being a CRP major at Cal Poly looks great on your resume and will open doors for you because of the solid skills that you will develop if you work hard in the program. As is everything in life, what you do with your career after school is up to you and how well you take advantage of opportunities that come your way. One way that you can create opportunities for yourself is to reach out to alumni to gain advice and mentoring on your career path. I would also suggest creating as many professional connections as you can while in school, as you never know when a certain connection will lead to an opportunity. I know finding a job that you enjoy and is a good fit can seem daunting, but if you continue following your true interests, work on building a network and gain as many work experiences as you can, you will find success. College, whether undergraduate or graduate, is one of the only times in your life when it is acceptable to jump from position to position, so take advantage of this and seek out as many work, travel, and education experiences as you can. It took me a long time to find the right place for me professionally, and even now, while I feel very fulfilled professionally and love my current job and the work I do, I never stop thinking about what are my next steps for my career.