

A SUGGESTED STUDENT ACADEMIC CAREER GUIDE

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Student’s Name

Anticipated Graduation Date

Faculty Advisor

Senior Student Mentor

Professional Mentor

Date _____

Purpose of this Guide.

The planning department faculty and its advisory council members are very interested in the success of every planning student. This guide conveys the thoughts of the planning practitioners on the advisory council to planning students at the beginning of their academic career. The importance of this early information is to enable students to design their individual academic programs to produce results that meet their interests and to anticipate the needs of prospective employers.

Appreciate the Importance of Becoming a “Master”.

You have chosen urban and regional planning as a course of study based on your personal goals and ambitions. Urban and regional planning is a serious and rewarding profession. A master’s degree in urban and regional planning empowers individuals as practicing professionals to make positive contributions to communities at all levels. Communities, individual developments, infrastructure plans, natural and social systems all need thoughtful attention. The future of the world and its communities demands intelligent, active and sensitive approaches to solve existing problems and to prevent or mitigate future problems.

This is what the urban planning master’s degree program is preparing you for as a professional planner. The department’s program is designed to prepare each graduate with knowledge, skills, values and learning processes to help you address society’s current needs and future opportunities. The faculty and advisory council, individually and collectively, usually stand ready to assist in this important endeavor.

Hold to Core Values.

Values lead to ethical principles that guide public planning in democratic societies. Ethical principles and core values cannot be compromised. A professional planner does not need to be liked, but she or he must be respected and trusted. A thoughtful ethical base is important.

Set Academic Career Objectives.

A graduate student seeking a master of arts degree in urban and regional planning has the opportunity to learn fundamental knowledge and skills to be well positioned to find employment and achieve your career goals. Your student experience can help you express personal values and establish goals to drive your academic career and subsequent professional career.

Explore Degree Options and Enhancements.

Many department offer a wide array of degrees, certificates and experiences that each student should review at the beginning of her or his academic career. Since many courses are offered only once during the academic year early course planning is necessary. The dual degree option must also be decided early in your academic career. Explore other possible enhancements in order to avoid missing an opportunity or having to stay longer in the program. Degree enhancements may include:

- Dual and Concurrent Degrees,
- Research Assistantships,
- Interdisciplinary Concentrations,
- Certificates and Specializations,
- Study Abroad Programs, and
- Internships and Part-Time Assignments.

Pay Attention to Personal Department.

The objective of every professional, especially an urban and regional planner, is to create and sell ideas. Planners spend significant time educating and informing constituents, stakeholders and decision-makers on the virtues of a proposed solution to a community problem. To accomplish this objective, you must influence people.

To influence people, you must have their respect and attention to the matter at hand. Dress, language, behavior and body language send messages that may or may not be intended. Remember:

- You only get one chance to make a first impression. First impressions are lasting impressions.
- Over 80% of interpersonal communication is non-verbal:
 - People read non-verbal messages and make decisions about you based on these messages, and
 - Body posture, gestures, facial expressions and eye movement convey strong messages, positive or negative.
- Ethical behavior is essential.
- Professional conduct is important:
 - Be on time; meet agreed-upon deadlines,
 - Be courteous and respectful, a good attitude is invaluable,
 - Avoid off-color stories and loud behavior,
 - Keep your workspace active but organized, and
- Clothes make the woman or man. Dress for success, appropriate for the occasion...consistent with that of the host.

Do not interpret an organization's casual work environment or casual dress as an invitation to casual work quality. Great organizations are devoted to their quality of work, their intense commitment to goals and their interest in schedules and budgets. Intense, demanding, mission-driven professionals who direct agencies or firms may look casual and act laid-back, but usually, they are not.

Knowing the Basics Really Counts.

Diligence, reliability, tenacity and preparation are some of the character traits of a successful professional. Producing high-quality work on-time and within a budget is not easy. Strong work habits will help ease the process to achieve this end. Become known as a hard worker.

Communication is a foundational element of the planning profession. The exchange of ideas and the communication of information demand the skill to compose clear, accurate and compelling text, images and maps in documents and presentations. ***The importance of the ability to effectively write and speak cannot be over-stated.***

Strengthen an Expanding Knowledge Base.

Have a World View. Planners increasingly need to take an active interest in the topics, events and techniques that are being discussed and pursued around the world. These greatly shape the environment for the profession moving forward.

Usually, an entry-level planner is hired because of his or her observable work habits, personal deportment, basic planning and communication skills, and personal/professional goals. This emphasis on work habits, deportment and skills is in recognition that a recent graduate has few opportunities to develop a deep understanding of community and other planning-related issues.

Deep knowledge of sophisticated issues is usually not expected at the beginning of one's career; what is expected is the ability and willingness to learn and care. As always, the more you know, the better.

Your base of knowledge is expected to grow over time. The specific areas of knowledge will vary depending on your area of specialization, work experience and interests. In general, as planning professionals gain senior status they expand both the breadth and depth of their knowledge in areas that include topics such as:

- The concepts and details of sustainability
 - Physical: Constructed and Natural
 - Spatial structure of urban and regional systems
 - Historic and natural resource preservation and enhancement
 - Economic: Micro and Macro
 - Real estate finance
 - Economic development and the effects of globalization
 - Public finance
 - Social and Political Sciences
 - Social infrastructure
 - Human capital development
- Land Use and Circulation Planning; Comprehensive Planning
- Local Public Finance, Financial Planning and Capital Budgeting
- The Concepts of Civil and Environmental Engineering
- The Concepts of Growth Management, Land Development Regulations and Land Use Law
- The History of Cities, Civilization and Human Settlement
- The Basics of Design with some sketchy ability
- The Social Structure of Communities

Course work is one way to gain knowledge; experiences in the field are another. Other learning opportunities are available through:

- Internships, pro bono work, field trips,
- Attendance at public hearings,
- Reviewing comprehensive plans and land development codes,
- Job shadowing and part-time work, and
- Participating in professional organizations such as the American Planning Association, the Congress for New Urbanism, the Florida Planning and Zoning Association and the Urban Land Institute.

Master Basic Skills.

Skills are learned through discussion, reading and repetition. Basic skills fundamental to performing planning tasks involve the ability to effectively communicate, collaborate and coordinate individual and collective work through fundamental skills:

- Listening,
- Writing, Technical and Creative: outlining, grammar, spelling,
- Reading, and
- Basic mathematics and statistical analysis tools.

Purposefully learned skills are:

- Knowing the basics of map preparation or application of GIS,
- Speaking: presenting in small and large group settings,
- Effectively using standard software such as Word, Outlook, Excel and PowerPoint,
- Team participation, facilitation, collaboration and management
- Research methods, especially development of relevant case studies with lessons learned and best practices,
- Professional use of social media,
- Numerical reasoning, computational skills and basic statistics,
- Graphic, sketching and visual communication skills and techniques, and
- Knowing the many methods of group decision-making.

The development of knowledge, skills and values can be a part of every class and individual project. Some, such as free-hand sketching or 3D modeling, are important communication skills that can be practiced on your own. Presentations, team projects, and individual papers can all be used to develop the fully array of the requisite basic skills.

Enhanced skills include critical thinking, complex problem solving, project management and systems analysis. These enhanced skills, like the basic ones, are tools needed to conduct planning studies and analysis. Their usefulness and effectiveness increases with practice.

Group dynamics are an important part of the planning process. Citizen and stakeholder participation is important in decision making that affects communities. Working in teams is common in many planning offices. Skills in organizing and facilitating group decisions are important.

Construct an Interesting Resume.

A resume summarizes and presents your experiences and skills. It should be visually pleasing. One should be constructed at the outset of your academic career and updated at the end of each term. Periodic review by your mentor, classmates and faculty will improve the results. Advice from career counselors is helpful to be able to respond to contemporary industry and professional expectations and processes. By graduation, the quality of your resume should be outstanding.

Build a Network.

Who you know matters. During your academic career there will be opportunities to meet a wide variety of people in many professions. Take advantage of these opportunities to make yourself known and to know others who can enhance your job prospects and career direction.

Find a Mentor.

A mentor is a wise and trusted counselor or teacher willing to listen to ideas and help evaluate situations. Mentors outside the day-to-day world may offer useful perspectives. Find a mentor early in your academic career, and then again in your professional career.

Establish Habits for Life-Long Learning and Professional Development.

Things change. What you know today will be different tomorrow. Life-long learning begins at the university, but continues through practice.

Create a personal system for life-long learning. Many topics are interesting in and of themselves; almost any topic eventually affects how people live in cities and urban areas. Continue to expand the breadth and depth of your knowledge over your career in areas such as:

- Related disciplines such as civil engineering, business finance and the environmental sciences [biology, geology and ecology],
- The design arts including architecture, landscape architecture, fine arts and urban design,
- Legal studies including constitutional protections, local land use law and administrative rules and procedures,
- Seemingly unrelated disciplines such as medicine, teaching, music, cosmology, geo-politics and foreign languages, and
- Methods that anticipate and envision the future.

Most employers expect to provide “on-the-job” training and intellectual development to new planners. Increased salaries and responsibilities, over time, demand adaptation to new roles and advanced learning. Certifications and accreditations, such as AICP, LEED and others are useful. Participation in community and professional organizations is usually interesting and helpful in expanding your horizons. Remain a student for life.