

Conversations with Alumni

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When I was invited to write a piece for Focus's alumni spotlight, putting forward for all to see my "professional" adventures, I was both honored and incredibly nervous. My career trajectory has felt stunted at times, and not necessarily the typical path of a CRP graduate. However, I happily agreed because, while not traditional, my career has been challenging, rewarding and captivating, and was all kickstarted by my undergraduate degree from Cal Poly. So here it goes... Where am I now, what have I learned, and what can I share with you?

Cal Poly was always my number one choice, and the only university I applied to- despite my high-school counsellor's plea to "extend my horizons". I wanted a degree in architecture. The summer before applying to college, I spent four weeks with Cal Poly's College of Architecture and Environmental Design in a summer career workshop. The Workshop provided me with hands-on experience in studio design exercises, gave me opportunities to attend lectures, participate in projects and go on valuable field trips. I learned about architectural design and history, structural engineering and site planning. It was during this workshop that I was first introduced to city planning and urban design. I applied to CalPoly, still with every intention of becoming an architect, but was accepted instead for my second choice degree, CRP. I ended up loving my classes, classmates, and professors and quickly realized it was a perfect fit. I had the privilege of graduating from Cal Poly's City and Regional Planning Program in 2009 with two minors, one in Sustainable Environments and another in the French Language.

Up until graduation, I was convinced and determined to become a successful employee with a reputable private design firm. This did not happen. Instead, I took a part-time internship with a non-profit active transportation advocacy organization, worked in a restaurant, and in my free time, trained for a marathon. My time with the Alliance for Biking and Walking allowed me to work independently across the country and also provided an introduction to the inner-workings of a national non-profit. The non-profit publishes a biennial Benchmarking Report summarizing data on bicycling and walking in all 50 states, and the

51 largest U.S. cities. The Report includes government data on bicycling and walking levels and demographics, safety, funding, policies, infrastructure, education, public health indicators, and economic impacts. This unexpected work drove, or rather rode, home the importance of healthy and equitable change in the places where we live, work, pray, and play. This ultimately catalyzed pursuing a complimentary Masters degree in public health (MPH). I packed my bags, left California, and headed to Oregon State University.

While studying at Oregon State, I was fortunate to work in the academic research sector through a two-year grant funded low-income rural youth garden project. As the program coordinator, I engaged in collaborative work with diverse groups of people. The Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) collaboration was designed to provide training, work experience, and improved health outcomes for vulnerable youth between the ages of 16-24. It offered opportunities for adults from the community and faith-based congregations to address issues of social justice by partnering with vulnerable youth. It created strong youth and adult partnerships leading to a sustainable youth garden entrepreneurship program. One of the garden sites continues to be active to this day!

Then, and still simultaneous to my time in academia, I took an internship within Oregon's public government sector with the Health Impact Assessment (HIA) Program. HIA is defined as "a combination of procedures, methods, and tools by which a policy, program, or project may be judged as to its potential effects on the health of a population, and the distribution of those effects within the population" (Gothenburg Consensus Statement, 1999). HIA is prospective in its approach, meaning that the health impacts of a proposal are assessed before a final decision is made, allowing the results of the HIA to be considered in the decision-making process. HIAs utilize objective information to minimize the negative health impact and maximize the positive health impacts of a project or policy. HIA continues to grow in practice and is applied to all sorts of projects from transit-oriented developments to park revivals, and even greenhouse





Resort concept for Nayarit, Mexico, with R. Brough, C. Garcia & C. Ortigoza. CRP 341 special summer studio, 2007. In collaboration with R2L Architects.

gas emission reduction policies. My work with HIA provided the validation I needed that my degrees were, in fact, complementary in the real world!

However, at the time, I was not completely aware of the fragility of public health funding both at the state and federal level... after a couple pauses in work, a short-term contract with a local county to work on chronic diseases and food insecurity policies, and some temp contracts with the state, I eventually got hired full time at the Oregon Public Health Division and continue to work with the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) to this day.

In my time with OHA, I have been involved with various environmental health programs. No week is like the other... Through funding uncertainties and legislative curveballs, I have gained exposure to the world of grant proposals, applications, management, reporting processes, and state policies. I have worked on health education, evaluation and data analysis projects with the Climate and Health Program, the Oregon Environmental Public Health Tracking program, the Domestic Well Safety Program, the Oregon Radon Awareness Program, and most recently the Environmental Health Assessment Program. While I may not be directly analyzing the impacts of community design and the built environment on public health, I now work with communities, agency partners, and other state and local programs to assess and prevent human exposure to toxics found at Superfund and other contaminated sites in Oregon.

I routinely conduct community outreach and engagement activities, convene public meetings, open houses and community advisory committees, and identify and prioritize overburdened and underserved groups within communities where we work. I also conduct site assessments, use InDesign and GIS to create useful and meaningful materials, and talk to planners about environmental data and health outcomes. Some are more obvious than others, but there are still so many elements of my CRP degree that are reflected in my daily work, even if I do not have the title of Planner in my professional accolades.

So, long story short, a few wisdoms I can confidently pass along as a state level Environmental Public Health Educator, with a planning background...

- Be open and adaptable. Expose yourself to opportunities—especially the ones you did not plan for.
- It is ok to feel like an imposter. You are not going to know what you are doing all of the time, but instead, strive for clarity around why you do what you do— then the how.
- Your network is perhaps the most valuable tool in your toolbox. Put yourself out there and communicate, communicate, communicate!
- Lastly: Practice mindfulness at home and the workplace. Take a pause, breathe, and then respond. It might be easy for some and hard for others, but a good deep breath never hurt anyone.



Nadege testing Portland's bike infrastructure.

The Bicycling and Walking Benchmarking Report, 2010. Available from <http://www.bikewalkalliance.org>

