

Spotlight

Reflections on Campus Planning: Lessons for Professional Practice

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CRP's new faculty William Riggs brings in significant experience in campus planning, having worked as a campus planner for the US Coast Guard and the University of California at Berkeley. In this article he discusses the challenges and rewards of campus planning, framed by unique processes, requirements, and standards.

Planning is a diverse field with many different areas of professional practice. Campus planning, as opposed to traditional city planning, is one of these areas—different than traditional municipal, and having a unique requirements that are framed by jurisdictional, environmental, and physical planning needs of the respective institution.

Based on my experience in this role, planners need a flexible skillset that moves beyond the traditional role of processing permits and crafting zoning codes. They need to be deep thinkers and leaders who can adapt to changing situations and understand nuanced bureaucracy. By taking advantage of it, as well as other practical words of wisdom, I believe both current and future planners can excel in almost any professional situation they find themselves in—being the glue that pulls unique projects and people together for success.



William Riggs at a US Coast Guard base.

Introduction

Since coming to Cal Poly during the 2012-13 academic year, I have been approached by many of my students with questions about my experience working in the campus planning environment for both the federal government (US Coast Guard) and as a Principal Planner for University of California (UC), Berkeley. These jobs were not only very different than the positions that many of my peers took in local government, they were less talked about in the academic environment. They involved a general yet holistic knowledge of the planning field and an ability to draw on skills ranging from urban design and physical planning to economic analysis and the environmental process to solve problems in a complex and highly bureaucratic environment.

Given this, it is my goal in this essay to touch on some of my professional experiences and talk about the opportunities in

working in a campus vs. city environment. Focusing on my professional experiences, I will compare and contrast the role of planners in these environments using unique projects as examples. Secondly I will continue by focusing on some of the challenges of working in the campus environment. Finally I will offer my own words of wisdom stemming from this experience and how they can be translated to paths to success in not only the campus and municipal environment but in the consulting world as well.

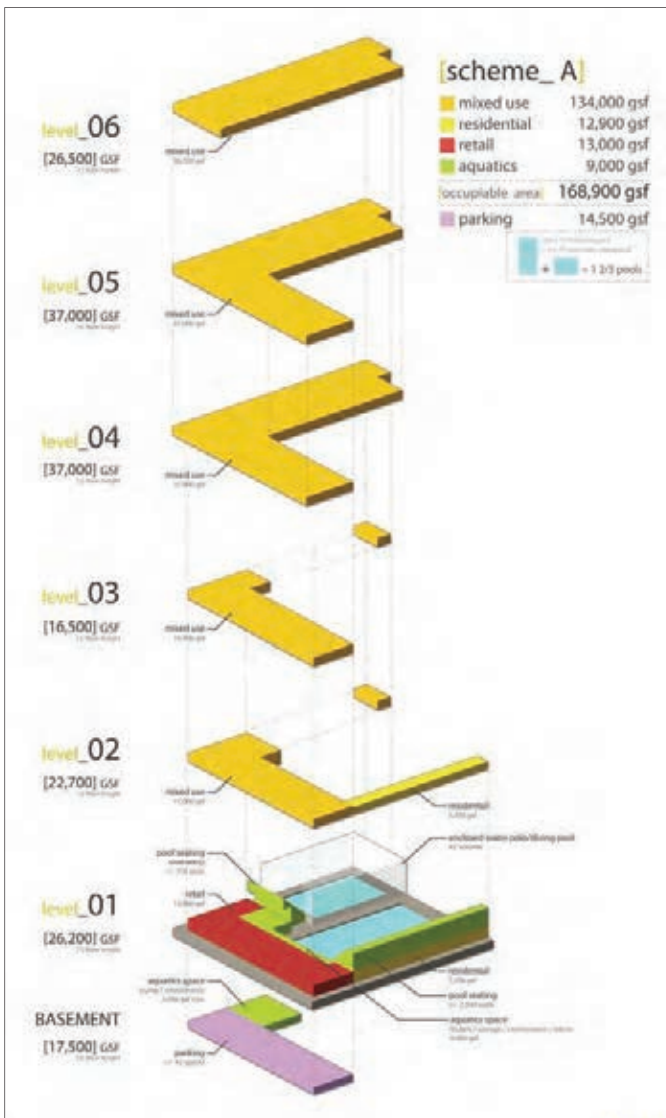
Opportunities

While planning in the campus environment is similar to planning in the city environment, a key distinction is the jurisdictional variation. Whether working for a corporate campus like Google or Facebook or for a state or a federal agency, each organization will likely have its own approval systems and standards that may be very different from a traditional city

planning process. Each is a shade similar to a municipal framework and may have some elements, but is unique unto itself.

For example, working for UC Berkeley there was a planning process that involved a series of collaborative committees that would make decisions on land use and capital projects. As a planner I would work on conceptual urban design and massing schemes for new facilities. These were for a variety of different types of projects, including academic buildings, parking garages, streetscape plans, athletics facilities and student housing. After completing the cursory design process, the project would be reviewed by a design review committee similar to a design review board. With their advice and input, it would then go to an executive campus committee under the chancellor for land use and budget consideration.

With that approval, the planning staff would begin environ-



The architectural lay-out scheme for the different levels of the aquatics facility (above), and the computer rendering showing its insertion in the city fabric.



mental clearances in parallel with more advanced design (schematic, design development, working drawings, etc.), and although a higher board (the UC Board of Regents in this case) might offer environmental approval for larger projects, the project basically would go forward at this point. This is different from a municipal environmental, where a city council might ultimately make a decision for a project, sometimes based more on political leanings than staff recommendations and committee work.

One of the more interesting projects I worked on that provides a good example was an intercollegiate aquatics facility. The goal of the project was to explore different options for an aquatics facility on the campus. With a team of planners and architects, we evaluated sites and configurations based on multiple criteria including site orientation, circulation / transportation, and urban design / place-making opportunities. We eventually settled on a parking site that offered not only a location for a large mixed-use structure but offered the possibility of creating an iconic architectural gesture that could potentially become the terminus for a greenway that would lead all the way to the local Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) line.

When the concepts were in draft form, the project went to several committees. They reviewed the land use and design factors as well as the relationship with adjacent properties and local zoning. Since the property provided a “seam” between residential and campus-oriented uses, reviewing the compatibility of uses was important. Both groups recommended that more active / athletics uses be placed on the campus side of the parcel and other uses such as offices and student housing be on the residential / neighborhood side. The executive planning committee and chancellor gave approval and required that financing be in place prior to breaking ground.

It is this fairly nimble and yet opaque process that is much different than a city environment. In a municipal setting, by comparison, a planner may not be able to work on a concept with committees and respond as quickly to feedback based on the demands of the public and the city council. Campus planners can set their own agenda in a way that city planners cannot because they do not answer to a council—to a certain extent they can design their own work program based on staff expertise and the needs of the organization—in reality setting their own work program and / or agenda to suit their own interests. This is a key distinction of campus planning, and allows planners in this position to work on a large diversity of projects.

Challenges

Likewise while this process of planning in a campus environment provides opportunities in terms of work portfolio diversity, it does pose challenges: primarily in the differences of the bureaucracy and because the “chain of command” is sometimes more diffuse. Many times it is more nuanced and political than the municipal environment. This nuance poses two problems: 1) it can slow down otherwise fast-

moving projects; and 2) it can sometimes lead to institutional complacency and entrenchment that threaten the success and / or quality of a project.

An example of the first problem, a slow-down based on the nuanced political environment of campus projects, was a Parking Masterplan I worked on in 2010. From the beginning it became very clear that parking numbers were dynamic and changing, even when we were completing the plan. As depicted in the graphic below, even other building projects that I was working on at the time were targeting the same surface lots that we were trying to gauge parking needs for.

At the same time there were numerous differing viewpoints about how to balance transit accessibility with auto mobility. Some on the campus felt that reducing the number of spaces would deter students, faculty, and staff from coming because of the loss of easy access to campus. This is despite the fact that that almost half of parking permit holders lived within a 5-mile radius of campus in a transit-rich area also conducive to biking and walking. Others felt as I did, that by fully supporting modes other than travel via auto, total accessibility would increase to the benefit of the local environment and would do so at substantial savings to the campus.

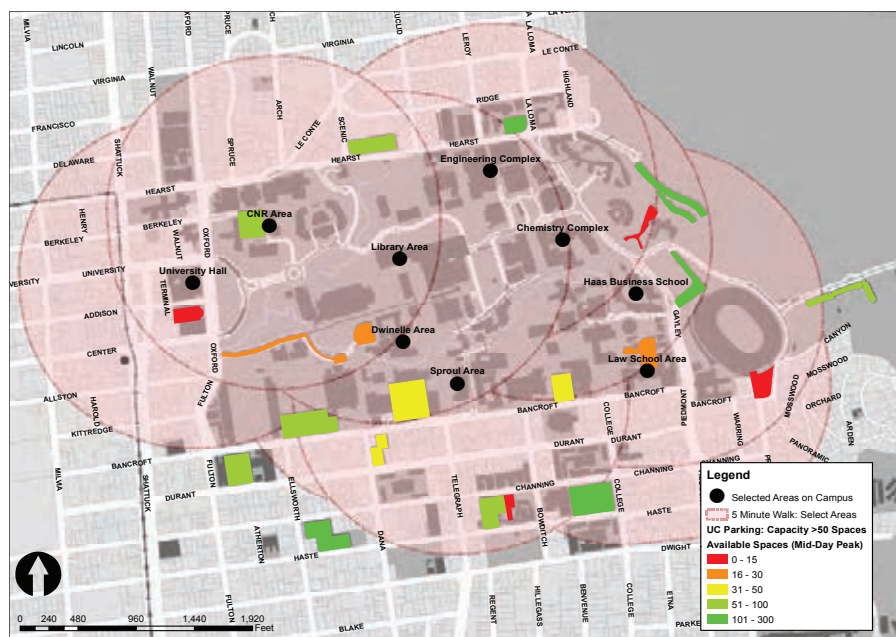
Being the head of a transportation program that was funded by parking revenues put me in the middle of this muddled situation that became almost paralytic, yet this lack of momentum was eventually overcome by two strategies. First, I used diplomacy and selling the ideas of a transportation demand management (TDM) strategy to each committee member individually. This primed them for an eventual decision incrementally and kept the topic fresh in their minds.

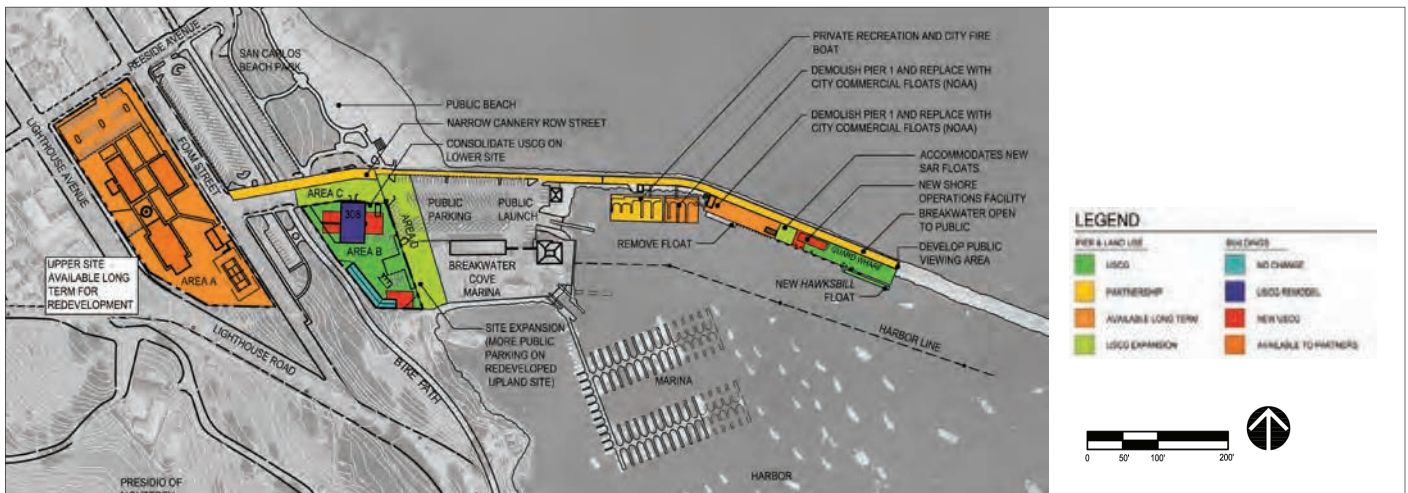
Secondly, working with a team of planners, I made sure the Parking Masterplan document was extremely well written, made linear arguments and could withstand critique—many times acknowledging concerns that had been vocalized during the planning process. Not only did this pave the way for a successful plan, it launched an important and lingering dialogue on the high cost of providing parking vs. the alternative of supporting patrons who travel via transit or those who bike or walk (on an annual basis, paying for all transit rides costs about one-quarter of the cost of providing parking).

As for the second issue, entrenchment, as with any organization, ideas in a campus environment can become stale because of the lack of substantial turnover in personnel and the lack of public stakeholder interface. In these situations planners can become marginalized based on “group-think” and a lack of diversity of ideas in leadership, resulting in projects not going forward “just because” or being put on the shelf to become very expensive paperweights.

Such was the case for one of my very first large professional projects—a \$300,000 facility plan for the Coast Guard pier in Monterey. The pier had been open to the public and a popular dive location, but was closed after the events of 9/11. Due to confusion and a lack of knowledge and / or willingness to discuss the issue at the leadership level, the pier was still closed in 2004 and was falling into disrepair. There was a disagreement about ownership between the Army (Presidio of Monterey) and the City of Monterey, and complaints about upkeep from the Coast Guard and Naval Postgraduate School. NOAA wanted to use the pier and had a federal allocation to build a dock for its research vessel but did not have a forum to discuss it with anyone. Caustic letters were being sent between the Army, Coast Guard and the City threatening the constitutional right

The UC Berkeley campus and its surroundings showing 5-minute walk distances from select areas and available parking spaces. Below, examples of campaigns to encourage the use of alternative transportation.





The Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary site and the chosen design alternative for the new waterfront facilities.



of federal agencies to usurp local right based on “navigational servitude”. Before anything could be done with the facilities, everyone had to come together and re-learn to collaborate.

With the support of my supervisors at the Coast Guard, I did research on the ownership and improvements that had been made at the pier—many of which the City had completed despite the fact that they did not have any ownership interest. I arranged a collaborative idea-sharing session for all parties to get to know one another and potentially move forward. Everyone expressed a desire to see the pier re-open to the public despite their other interests in security and / or expanded facilities. After this, I was able to present the history of collaboration that many at the table were not aware of, along with a proposed way forward. In this situation we were the “glue”—the people who bring together all of the folks who normally wouldn’t talk to one another—that paved the way to begin work on a new plan for Coast Guard facilities. Eventually this plan even focused on trading desirable land to the City of Monterey in exchange for an increased footprint at the head of the pier.

While the plan was long overdue, it was only by keeping focus and momentum, and constantly remembering the collective history of the project, that we could keep it moving. As a result, since then I have always advised my clients to never stop moving—even if you are taking just baby steps. I used to tell my UC Berkeley clients that forward momentum should be their best friend and ally in getting capital projects completed. As projects are shelved the clarity of focus becomes less clear, and before long, the plan loses relevance—especially to the stakeholders who had been invested and involved in shaping it.

Conclusion

Campus planning is but one shade or slant on a planning field, and while it is something that I never planned to get into (and stumbled upon as my career developed) it is an area where people who are flexible and like a diverse work program, in a nuanced political environment, can flourish. That said, because I did happen on the field by accident, given that none of us know our exact future, I would encourage flexibility.

Despite the fact that many of us have specific desires in what we think we want as a professional, from my experience I’ve found that the best philosophy is to be open to opportunity and let one’s career develop organically. To illustrate this I sometimes use the expression *Semper Gumbi* or “always flexible”. This is a play on the Coast Guard’s motto *Semper Paratus*, which is Latin for “always ready”. Using this philosophy I’ve seen some of my own peers “cast their nets” as widely as possible, open to new avenues of the field of planning, and by doing so turn their planning education into new adventures.

Because of this I would offer some words of wisdom in navigating the professional realm of planning practice for both current planners and those entering the profession. As I’ve alluded earlier, these do not apply solely to the area of campus planning, but they incorporate many of the ideas I mentioned in this essay. I have used them as a guide to developing my own skillset so I can do as Forester (1982) suggests and effectively

“plan in the face of power” in whatever type of professional environment I find myself in.

They can be translated to any area—so whether it be like one of my friends, who found a job working with hospitals to be better prepared for disasters, or another who is making movies about walkability and housing, they can be a guide

in developing a holistic and flexible skillset. Equipped in this way, planners can fill many holes and find niches that work for individual skillsets. And it just so happens that one of those areas in the planning field might be a campus environment.

Ten Practice Job Skills in Urban Policy and Planning

When students ask me what got me my first job I am candid with them and tell them it was my diversity of experience and the out-of-class experiences that were most important. While I had done very technical and ground-breaking plans for the Town of Dangriga, Belize, interned for an English urban design firm, and had excellent GIS skills, it was my personal experience working in Africa and doing volunteer economic development work for the neighborhood of Old Louisville that caught people's eye on my CV. Keep this in mind when presenting yourself on paper and in person and do not let your diversity of experience and passion for what you love be overshadowed by technical prowess.

1. Diversify Your Skillset / Experience

- a. Try to learn as broadly as you can
- b. Refine these skills based on job requirements

2. Think at Different Scales and Remember the Big Picture

- a. Learn technical skills but understand their context

3. Learn to Write Well

- a. Key Steps
 1. Content: Develop good content
 2. Polish: Polish breeds trust
 - a. Proofread for careless errors that undermine your points
 - b. Be succinct: if you can say it in 3 words don't use 5
 3. Design:
 - a. Use bullets
 - b. Consistency: fonts and hierarchy
 - c. White space

4. Identify and Capitalize on Your Strengths

- a. Make yourself indispensable

5. Know When (and When Not) to be Wonky

- a. Be deliberate in using lay language and do not use acronyms

6. Be confident and sell yourself

- a. Tout your successes but don't exaggerate
- b. No one else is going to toot your own horn louder than you

7. Trust but don't be careless

- a. Remember that others may not always have your interest in mind
- b. Keep careful records and save everything
- c. Keep your online life personal

8. Update your resume continually

- a. Scan for opportunities that might be of interest
- b. Be aggressive in networking / informational interviews especially when potential jobs are concerned
- c. Make it professional and always bring a copy to an interview
- d. Use easy-to-read fonts and don't be too “designy”
- e. Keep records of all applications and stay organized

9. Think and Speak in a Linear Way

- a. Outline 3 points / answers
- b. Explain the points
- c. Remind about the points

10. Think broadly about job options

- a. Many tiers of government, non-profits, technology companies, public policy analysis, related fields, etc.
 1. Planners are deep thinkers and deep thinkers are desirable
 2. Planners are glue that can be the individual that holds disparate teams that otherwise might not work together
- b. Don't overlook internships when you are looking for full-time employment