

Shaping the future: A refreshed approach to planning education in the North

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For over 30 years, the planning program at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) has built a distinctive identity rooted in sustainability. This is fitting given UNBC's reputation as *Canada's Green University*. Our program, first established in environmental planning, evolved into a unique set of specializations, preparing students to become skilled professionals in community planning, First Nations planning, and environmental planning. These areas continue to fit regional needs in the North as well as more broadly across non-metropolitan, rural and remote areas in British Columbia and beyond.

The roots of the program in environmental planning remain strong. All students in each of our majors develop proficiency in sustainability and environment through specialized course work such as *Sustainable Communities*, *Environmental Law*, and *Environmental Impact Assessment* - among other courses that emphasize planners as stewards of the environment. Faculty research and student initiatives continue to advance thinking around environmental issues in different planning contexts. Our alum have carried these learnings into practice – and have emerged as leaders in environmental planning throughout the province, country, and world.

Our program is now undergoing an exciting

transformation, which began several years back with the launch of a new strategic plan for the School of Planning and Sustainability. This process provided us with the time and space to reflect on the future of our programs, eventually leading us to complete a comprehensive review of the curriculum. Over 2023 and 2024, we reviewed student learning and current learning needs, guided by thorough engagement with students, alum and employers. As a result of these thoughtful discussions, we were able to revise our curriculum in a way that engages our new faculty's strengths and expertise, invests in experiential learning for students of today, meets the needs of employers for planners with soft and hard skills, and builds our engagement with communities in the region.

This process culminated with a proposal to add several new courses that involve students in accessible design, climate resilience, community engagement, reconciliation, housing, and real estate development. This refreshed suite of courses not only *strengthens our foundation*, but ensures our program is appropriately equipping students with the skills and knowledge needed to address the pressing challenges of today.

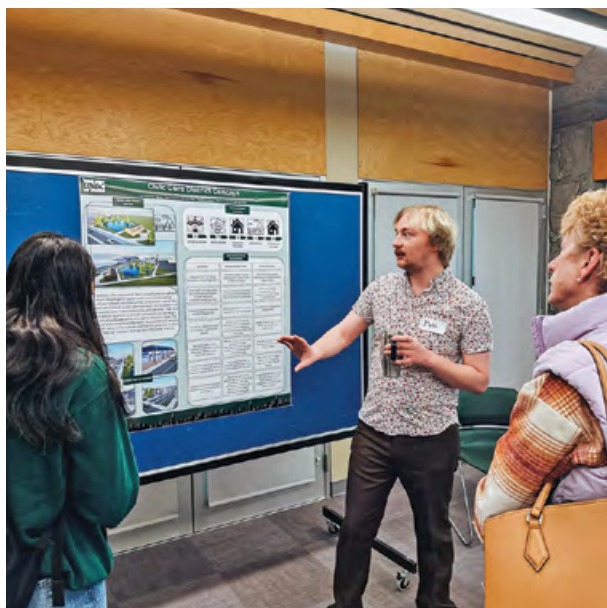
Two new studio courses taught by Dr. Mark Groulx, *ENPL 415 – Sustainable and*

Inclusive Design Studio and ENPL 417 – Local Climate Action Studio, will strengthen our curriculum in the areas of climate change and urban design. In 415, students are introduced to design thinking and complete a site design that incorporates social-ecological sustainability with a strong emphasis on inclusion. Moreover, in 417, students learn about the predominant approaches to adaptation planning. Furthermore, they have to critically examine concepts that frame local climate action, including risk, resilience, and co-benefits. Given our geographic context, the course focuses on rural and remote communities in northern Canada, and students work on a project relevant to this context.

In *ENPL 320 – Land Use and Development Studio*, Dr. Rylan Graham encourages students to think like developers. For their class project, students are tasked with developing and pitching a proposal for an underutilized parcel of land in downtown Prince George. In putting together their proposal, students must navigate site constraints, align with policy and regulations, and respond to market forces. Bringing all these elements together, students present their proposals—complete with a detailed financial pro forma—to a jury of planning and development experts.



In the winter semester of 2024, students in a fourth-year class, co-taught by Dr. Mark Groulx and Dr. Rylan Graham, worked with Kenna Jonkman RPP, MCIP and Heather Meier RPP, MCIP from the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George staff to develop housing and agricultural policies for Electoral Area A.



Having spent the semester developing a concept plan for the proposed Civic Core District in downtown Prince George, students shared their vision with community members at a year-end open house.

A highlight of our studio courses is the opportunity for students to collaborate with community partners on real-world projects. For example, in 2024, students worked closely with the Regional District of Fraser Fort George to design an engagement plan to capture the perspectives of young adults about the future of the Regional District. Students then used their findings to develop housing and agriculture policies, which informed the work of planners at the Regional District. In other courses, students have worked closely with other community partners including BC Parks, Spinal Cord Injury BC, Northern Development Initiative Trust, and the Nak'azdli Whut'en First Nation. These opportunities provide students with invaluable experiences, while also strengthening our presence in the community.

Along with the core progression in studio learning, we have also added course work to build knowledge and skills in decolonization and indigenization across all majors, and added one course in housing, developed by Dr. Tara Lynne Clapp. In this course, *Housing: From Concept to Construction*, students will learn the basics of housing systems, the interaction of these in the housing crisis, and an understanding of the challenges and opportunities of planning, creating, and building secure and affordable housing for middle- and lower-income households.

As we look forward to the future, we envision another thirty years of helping to shape the next generation of planners. With a commitment to innovation in planning education, our recent curricular changes ensure that our program is responsive of both current and future needs. These changes ensure that our students (and future alum) have the necessary knowledge and skills needed to be professional planners in Northern BC and beyond!

Community-based learning in action: Insights from a student perspective (Chloe Taylor)

In the winter semester of 2024, a group of upper-year students had an opportunity to work with the Regional District of Fraser-Fort George on a refresh of the Official Community Plan. The goal of the project was to provide the Board of Directors with the perspectives of young adults about housing and agricultural policy for Electoral Area A. The perspectives of young adults are often underrepresented in regional planning, and as a young adult from a rural context, the chance to engage in this work was personally meaningful and professionally enriching!

With guidance from the planners at the Regional District, and our professors, we developed an engagement strategy designed to reach young adults in the area. The plan involved creating a survey and hosting in-person events in two unincorporated communities within the Electoral Area. While the survey was overall successful, the in-person events highlighted a key lesson about public engagement: despite our best efforts, public engagement can be unpredictable. One community had an excellent turnout, while the other had few attendees - despite little variation in our approach advertising the events.

From the data we collected, we found that young adults were particularly concerned about the affordability and availability of housing, the significant barriers to working in agriculture, and the absence of resources for food processing. These findings were pivotal in shaping our policy recommendations.

One challenge we faced during the course was managing a large volume of community feedback. With numerous survey responses

and input from community members, synthesizing and analyzing the data required careful attention to detail. This challenge ultimately strengthened my ability to conduct critical analysis and make sense of complex, diverse viewpoints - a skill I know will be essential in my future career.

The final presentation to the board was one of the most stressful and rewarding days of the semester. For most of us, this was our first time presenting to a group of elected officials. With the support of our professors and a united front boosting our confidence, our group did very well!

For me, this course was a formative experience. It not only provided us with the opportunity to engage in meaningful community outreach, building real world experience and relationships, but also allowed us to develop essential skills in policy writing and data analysis. The lessons learned from both the successes and challenges of the project will continue to shape my approach to community planning and public engagement in the future. I remain grateful to the professionals and professors that made this course happen!

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