

GETTING TRACTION IN PLANNING EDUCATION – VANCOUVER ISLAND UNIVERSITY’S UPDATE

/ Pamela Shaw PhD, RPP, FCIP, Mark Holland RPP, FCIP, and Tove Lundsten, PIBC Student Member Representative

It has been exciting to watch the growth and investment in planning education in the province. Each university is shaping their planning program differently – with new undergraduate programs being offered and refinements to existing graduate planning programs being undertaken.

Vancouver Island University (VIU) is a regional, special-purpose university with a long history of focusing on excellence in teaching. The Master of Community Planning Program is rooted in a concept of applied scholarship - building a disciplined academic foundation in planning, and then tying classroom-based learning to practical examples and real-life experiences.

Fall 2022 is our eighth cohort! In the lead-up to the launch of the planning school in 2015, faculty spent time answering a key question: “What does a planner need to know to be effective in practice in the 21st century?”

The challenge then was to translate the responses into a refined and intensive, two-year graduate program. The ongoing task has been to hone the initial curriculum and range of experiences each year to keep up-to-date with new and evolving issues through continuous improvement.

Prospective students are required to submit a Statement of Intent that speaks to their interest area(s), along with transcripts, a resume, and three references. The admissions process is highly competitive with many more applications than spaces in the program.

Approximately 20 to 25 students are selected for the program each year. All course work is completed between September and April over two years (a total of four semesters) and students spend the intervening summer between first and second year either conducting their research or engaging in employment in the planning field.



VIU’s professors are respected and published academics and our curriculum meets all of the Professional Standards Board’s current functional and enabling competencies relating to academics. Required courses include history, theory, research methods, policy analysis, ethics, and First Nations planning. As well, all students must complete a minimum 100-page thesis/major project.

Most all who teach in the school are also full time practitioners (“prac-academics”). As such, the focus of the curriculum is very much on the daily practice of planning in BC communities, including local government roles, consulting, First Nations, housing, and real estate development.

We are also strongly rooted in the geography of our location - issues

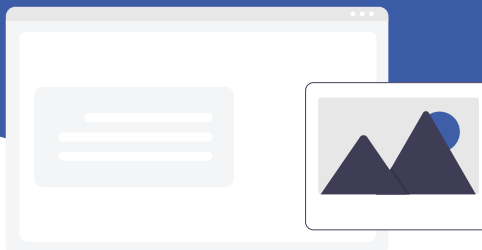


Images courtesy of the Community Planning Program

relating to islands, coasts, urban/rural interfaces, small communities, and the economics of our location. Conceptualizing the world through a focus on islands necessarily leads to intensive learnings around sustainability, equity, and the impacts of humans on fragile landscapes.

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We enable our students to:

- Assume the responsibilities of a practicing front line planner from the day they graduate.
- Develop skills in critical thinking, analysis, written and oral communications, graphic design, independent research, and teamwork.
- Understand the interconnected issues and wicked problems facing planners in the 21st century.
- Connect to PIBC/CIP and develop a commitment to becoming a Registered Professional Planner (RPP) with high standards in ethics and professionalism.

Over the years, a range of new opportunities have developed to encourage the students to learn and explore areas of personal interest through a wide range of para-academic offerings, including:

- Orientation Week: the first week of September engages students in a “deep dive” into a planning issue with a First

Nation community or local government, including a three-day charrette on a challenging site with many physical, social, cultural, environmental and contextual issues.

- Mentor Program: every student is assigned a member who is an RPP in good standing at the annual Mentors’ Banquet, a “posh affair” that happens in September of each year. The mentor program connects students to practitioners from the start of the student’s program, and ideally this mentor will be a trusted advisor for the student throughout their academic life and remain a mentor and colleague as the student advances their career.
- Research Boot Camp: all students are engaged in a two-day research experience intended to provide insight into conducting research at the highest ethical and academic standards.
- Current Planning Boot Camp: this three-day intensive puts students into the two main roles on a development

application. All students have the opportunity to play the roles of both a current planner and a developer for different applications in different municipalities. The boot camp concludes with faculty playing a mock council with all teams presenting both as applicants and as planning staff.

- Colloquia: students have the opportunity to attend many formally organized presentations each term on a range of interesting issues, delivered by RPPs or others in related professions.
- Certificate Courses: Students can choose to complete the Urban and Regional Planning Certificate while enrolled at VIU in addition to their degree. These six one-day courses focus on issues not otherwise addressed in the classroom. Students may also choose to extend their education through two additional larger academic Certificate programs that are part of the MCP “ecosystem” – the Professional Indigenous Lands Management

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Certificate (<https://socialsciences.viu.ca/indigenous-lands-management>) and the Indigenous Protected and Conserved Areas Planning Advanced Certificate (<https://socialsciences.viu.ca/indigenous-protected-and-conserved-areas-planning>).

- Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute (MABRRI): the Program is affiliated with a UNESCO-designated Biosphere Region and many students are employed each year on community-based applied research projects. This institute has grown to be the largest research and engagement institute at VIU within a few years.
- Future Plans: Students founded “Future Plans”, a peer-reviewed journal for students all across Canada. All students are invited to publish an article or review and the journal specifications are available at www.futureplansjournal.com.
- Connecting to the Profession: Students are invited to engage in a broad range of formal and informal events and experiences with PIBC’s Vancouver Island North Chapter. Highlights for this year include Park(ing) Day in September and the Urban Issues Film Festival, which is held annually in conjunction with the local celebration of World Town Planning Day.

The planning landscape is ever-changing. Recent years have exposed systemic inequities and brought to light issues relating to justice, equity, inclusion, and diversity. The MCP Program at VIU will continue to evolve and adapt to meet the challenge of graduating the next generations of planners who can “hit the ground running” as effective, contributing, and world-changing professionals. ■

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Mark Holland is a professor in the Community Planning Program and a Principal at Westplan Consulting Group.

Tove Lundsten is a Master of Community Planning Candidate.

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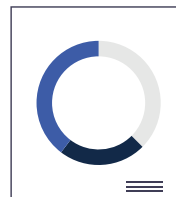
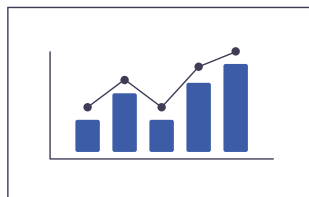


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