



CDWSP CENTRAL

Nurturing the Next Generation of Community Development Professionals

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Office of University
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CDWSP Alum Sees Opportunity for Learning in Every Experience

When graduate students in the CDWSP program at the University of Cincinnati (UC) complain about having to complete mundane tasks during their internships at local planning agencies, Vanessa McMillan-Moore can empathize. A 1986 graduate of the university's School of Planning and a participant in the CDWSP program that she now helps administer, McMillan-Moore performed her share of mundane tasks during her 2 years of graduate school. However, after 16 years at Cincinnati's Department of City Planning, McMillan-Moore has learned never to underestimate the value of these tasks.

In addition to working on local planning projects, HUD fellows at UC may coordinate mailings and make copies for the agencies where they work, says McMillan-Moore, who is work placement coordinator for the School of Planning's CDWSP program in addition to continuing her work with the city planning department. McMillan-Moore feels serious about the responsibility of ensuring that local agencies give students quality assignments during their full-year and summer placements. She also tries to impress on students that an occasional mundane job can be a valuable learning experience.

"I tell them to look at what they are copying and to read what they are mailing so they can gain more knowledge," she says. "When someone gives them an assignment,

I advise them to find out what that person's career path was. I tell them to ask their co-workers what they like about their jobs."

McMillan-Moore's advice should ring true for students because it is rooted in her own experience. After earning her undergraduate degree in sociology from UC in 1984, McMillan-Moore took on a low-paying summer position coordinating a Rent-a-Kid Program sponsored by a grassroots organization called the Citizen Commission on Youth. While finding jobs for local youths, McMillan-Moore heard through a coworker that UC was recruiting



minority students for its graduate planning program.

"It was free tuition, a stipend, your books at no cost, and my job was ending," she explains. "That's how I got into planning."

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CalPoly Student Helps Improve Housing Authority Programs

When Antonia Toledo attended the University of California-San Diego (UCSD) in the late 1990s, she wrote a case study about a major government project that would improve transportation along the U.S. border with Mexico. Toledo completed the study of the Comprehensive Transportation Development Program (CTDP) during an undergraduate internship with the California Department of Transportation. The experience sparked an interest in the regional and global implications of city planning and convinced Toledo that she wanted to pursue additional urban planning studies after she graduated from UCSD in 1999.

"CTDP's goal was to strengthen the potential of NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement]

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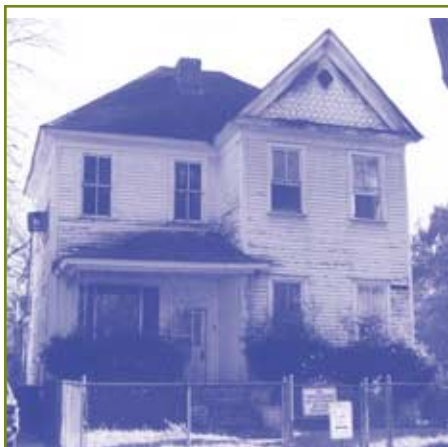
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She continues: "Rent-a-Kid was a low-paying job. I think I made \$5.30 an hour. When I first was offered the job, I said, 'I'm not doing that. I have a bachelor's degree.' But I went ahead and took the job and it changed my life. I learned quickly how important it is to get out and work, and to do a good job, no matter what you're doing. You never know where it will lead."

Diversity in planning skills

Although McMillan-Moore's entrée into planning may seem unplanned, she remains extremely satisfied with her career choice. She spent 12 years as a senior planner with Cincinnati's Department of City Planning and now manages the department's Community and Strategic Planning Division, which writes the city's major planning documents. She and her nine-member staff have just begun to work on developing a comprehensive plan for the city, a major undertaking that will consume most of the next 2 years.

Since she arrived in the planning department in 1986, McMillan-Moore has done



everything from writing the environmental reviews required for Community Development Block Grant funding to coordinating the city's marketing campaign for the 2000 census. Before being promoted to her current position 2 years ago, McMillan-Moore directed a Citizen Neighborhood Action Strategy initiated by the city manager. Her ambitious strategy organized city staff into interdisciplinary teams and gave each team responsibility over a specific area of the city.

"Each team is responsible for getting to know the people, the infrastructure, the issues, and the problems in its particular area, and for establishing relationships with our citizens," she explains. "The goal is to give citizens a [contact] person to call if they have a problem, instead of calling a main number and getting bounced around."

The assignment involved research, working with many other city departments, training interdisciplinary teams, and conducting community outreach. Having the opportunity to complete a variety of tasks in the course of a single project is what McMillan-Moore loves most about planning. She is also pleased that her longtime interest in group dynamics—an interest that led McMillan-Moore to major in sociology as an undergraduate—remains a big part of her job.

"In the Community and Strategic Planning Section, we do a lot of consensus building," she says, "so I get many opportunities to explore the best methods for working with groups. For this reason, getting a graduate degree in planning was a win-win for me."

Learning by doing

Although the free tuition and books may have lured McMillan-Moore to the planning field, her internships in the CDWSP program convinced her to stay, she says.

"What I learned in books is important to me, but the experience stays with me longer," she says. "I didn't just read about it; I've done it, and so I know it. You need to be able to apply your knowledge in a real setting so that it really stays with you. Otherwise, after a year or two the knowledge is going to go away."

Much of what McMillan-Moore learned in her internships did stay with her—and with the city. Her first assignment as a HUD fellow took McMillan-Moore to the Coalition of Neighborhoods, a community-based organization that asked her to help residents in a particular city neighborhood establish a business association. She is proud to report that the association is still going strong 15 years later.

A second CDWSP assignment took McMillan-Moore to the city's housing department, where she processed loan applications for a homeownership program and completed a study of how other cities zone single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels. The assignment gave McMillan-Moore invaluable contacts within the city government that she believes helped her land her current job. Her work on the SRO study came in handy years later when McMillan-Moore was asked to write a text amendment on SRO housing for the planning department. That amendment, which is now part of the city's zoning code, identifies where SROs can be located.

Although McMillan-Moore characterizes her CDWSP experience as challenging, she admits that she never would have chosen a planning career if she had not been accepted into the CDWSP program. Her determination to complete the program once she was accepted paid off with a good job that she loves. McMillan-Moore also says that her graduate education gave her an invaluable background that has helped her succeed in other areas.

"The most valuable thing I learned in planning school is how to take any problem and work the process to come up with a solution," she says. "It involves evaluating the problem, setting your goals and objectives, doing your analysis, identifying alternatives, evaluating those alternatives, making a recommendation, and doing a follow up. I had the opportunity to apply that process in the classroom and to work the process during my internships. And I soon realized that this model can be applied to any problem. That is the thing that really sticks out in my mind after all these years. That's what I took away from graduate school and what I still apply every day." ♦

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through transportation,” says Toledo about her case study. “The main idea behind the program is that an improved transportation infrastructure can enhance the flow of imports and exports, thus contributing to the local economy.”

Armed with a bachelor’s degree in urban studies and planning—and a desire to learn more—Toledo applied to the master’s degree program in city and regional planning at California Polytechnic State University (CalPoly) in November 2000 and became a CDWSP fellow. The college also supports two other CDWSP fellows who, like Toledo, must participate in a minimum of three internships a year during their graduate studies.

CalPoly works with a number of community partners, including the local housing authority and planning department, to plan and carry out its CDWSP internships. The college encourages interns to rotate their graduate placements among several partners so they can gain a better understanding of just how varied their career opportunities could be. After just two internship placements, Toledo is convinced.

“City and regional planning allows for a great deal of opportunities,” she says. “With a degree in planning I can work in housing, economic development, transportation, or research. I like the idea of a career with many options. I could be in front of the computer one day and interacting with a community of people the next. It’s great!”

During the spring 2002 semester, Toledo worked at the Housing Authority of San Luis Obispo, which provides housing assistance to low-income residents. Her primary job was assisting Director George Moylan with project development.

“Our goal was to provide Antonia with as broad a spectrum of experience as we could while she was here,” explains Moylan. “I’d like to think Antonia enjoyed her time here and that she received valuable experience.”

Toledo’s internship proved valuable to the housing authority as well. Moylan says he is extremely pleased not only with the work Toledo performed, but also with the housing authority’s partnership with CalPoly.

“We’ve had a long history with [the college]...but this formalizes our relationship,” he says. “CalPoly is a tremendous resource for the community and for our agency.”

The housing authority internship provided Toledo with fundamental practice in written and verbal communication skills. In addition, Toledo says she was given an unexpected opportunity to perform like a professional and to work with other professionals. During one project, for example, Toledo completed a proposal for a new tax credit housing division within the housing authority and, according to Moylan, was given “carte blanche in her



research and preparation of the proposal.” She also helped plan disability education workshops, worked on cases dealing with tenant-based rental assistance, and created a map of Section 8 housing in the area.

“I worked on projects to improve current housing authority programs,” says Toledo. “I did work that the housing authority really had no staff for and which had underlying implications that helped make different programs better.”

Although Toledo has benefited from the guidance she received from Moylan and other internship supervisors, she says that CalPoly professors also have helped make her internships a success.

“I have definitely been working on projects related to what we’re learning in class,” she says. “And some of the [in-class] assignments give us a chance to practice what we will be doing in the real world. An advantage to practicing beforehand, as we do in classes, is getting feedback from the professors to make us better professionals.”

After she graduates in June 2003, Toledo hopes to work in economic development with an organization that helps the working poor.

“I’d also like to work in areas where planning policy and practice have not been too friendly to low-income communities. I would like to be some kind of advocate for communities [that] are environmental justice victims or targets. Most importantly, I hope to make a difference in the direction [that] development may be headed in different communities.” ♦

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