THE FUTURE BEGINS WITH URBAN PLANNING

WHERE DO YOU FIT IN?

We're featuring stories of alumni from our website in this edition. We are also looking for a few more volunteer writers, alumni working in our focus areas: communities; mobility; equity, diversity, and inclusion; livability; and economy.

The webpage can be found here.
Contact us at planning@bsu.edu
Retirement calls: Students and alumni are my biggest blessings

By Scott Truex, Chair

We are excited to provide the fourth edition of Alumni Voices. The credit for this endeavor goes to Christine Rhine, who edits and chats with all the contributors. Also, Lohren Deeg provides graphic insights to complete the publication. Thank you to both of them for putting this together.

As many of you know, I am leaving my position as chair and faculty member of the department. It has been a great run since joining the department in the fall of 1986.

Reflecting on this time, I can easily say the highlight has been the opportunity to spend time with students in class and on many adventures around the country. Weekly, I state how amazing our alums are and the success they are having globally, impacting people, places, and the planet. In addition, it has been a blessing to me to get to know many of you personally.

I look forward to continuing to follow your professional successes and personal growth. My next adventures will continue with my profession and personal passions, which I am sure will involve many of you in some way.

Enjoy these stories and join me in celebrating our alums and their accomplishments and insights. Thanks for the continued support through lectures, guest appearances, internships, and financial support.

One of my favorite activities has become the annual White River Cleanup day held each September. This year 40 students accompanied me!
My professional career started down a completely different path from where I am today: in media relations and sports administration, specifically in college athletics communications. I earned my undergraduate degree in Sport Management from Cleveland State University while working as a student assistant in CSU’s athletic department. I got my first full-time media relations job at Butler University, where I spent three years as the communications contact for the women’s basketball, baseball, and volleyball teams. Despite the positive attributes of the job, I found myself desiring more significance in my work and longing for an opportunity to make an impact in my hometown of Cleveland. So, in 2009, I decided to go back to school full time to pursue my master’s degree in Urban and Regional Planning at Ball State, where not only was I able to obtain an immersive and invaluable education but was afforded the opportunity to intern with my now current employer, Greater Cleveland Partnership. In the decade since then, I have had significant involvement in numerous civic projects and initiatives involving transportation, transit, maritime commerce, public spaces, catalytic real estate development, neighborhood planning, community relations, and conservation.

Advancing project in minority neighborhood is a pride point

My recent work with the suburban city of Warrensville Heights has been and continues to be incredibly rewarding. This predominantly minority community on the southeast side of Cuyahoga County has been working to implement a significant neighborhood and economic development project that will include mixed-income housing, retail, office, and a new community park. I have been able to play a central role in advancing this project through GIS mapping, socioeconomic data gathering, and the completion of a successful grant application for the park’s construction. This project has allowed me to build trust and confidence from city leadership as I remain integrated in their ongoing planning and development efforts.
My organization, the Greater Cleveland Partnership, is the largest regional membership-driven chamber of commerce in the nation. In addition to the core function of providing business assistance services to our area companies, GCP serves as a critical participant in major planning and development work in Cleveland, which is where my role is primarily focused.

As Director of Civic Engagement and Projects, I routinely work with local and regional public sector agencies – including the City of Cleveland and other suburban municipalities, Cuyahoga County, GCRTA, ODOT, community development corporations, and other public organizations – on planning and development projects that involve broad collaboration and generate regional impact.

Currently this includes advancing the transformation of downtown Cleveland’s lakefront and riverfront, transportation and economic development projects like the Opportunity Corridor boulevard, and planning and development projects involving neighborhoods, municipalities, and businesses.

Advice for students

Actively work to understand different perspectives and interests that, on the surface, conflict with what you know about planning.

Talk to people from other fields to better appreciate their objectives and don’t allow any preconceived notions get in the way of building relationships. Partnerships are key to getting things accomplished with maximum benefit.

Some of the best professional relationships I have, and the ones that have been most beneficial to my work, are with organizations and entities that have typically been viewed by the planning field as adversaries, in particular the state DOT, traffic engineers, and economic development organizations. Having strong relationships with these groups has been invaluable to my career.

Chris Urban: What does your current job involve?

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During my senior year of college, I was trying to figure out my next steps. I decided to pursue a term of service with Public Allies Indianapolis—an apprenticeship program that pairs emerging leaders with nonprofit organizations where they help address critical community needs. I was placed at a community development organization, which was my entry point into the world of planning and community development. My primary responsibilities were managing volunteers and acting as a liaison between the organization and neighbors.

After my term of service ended, I accepted a staff position with the organization. For the next few years, I worked on a variety of community development projects—from developing neighborhood parks to redesigning a busy traffic intersection. I discovered I had a passion for the work, but I wanted to develop technical expertise. So, I applied to CAP’s Master of Urban and Regional Planning program.

I never imagined myself working for the government, but my graduate assistantship with the City of Indianapolis helped broaden my understanding of the role the public sector plays in shaping the city. Since 2019, I’ve worked at the Department of Metropolitan Development as the Principal Planner for Land Use Strategy. I’m a member of the Long-Range Planning team, which is responsible for the comprehensive plan—a framework that provides a long-term vision for the city’s future, including policies that guide development decisions.

Most of my time is dedicated to ensuring new developments align with city policies. I review development proposals and work with other city staff, developers, and neighbors to reach agreements on acceptable site plans. I also serve as the Hearing Officer for the Board of Zoning Appeals, where I help decide land use cases that seek a relaxation of the zoning ordinance.

I think it’s important to be curious. I don’t believe my career would be the same if I stopped being curious—asking questions, meeting new people, trying new things, exploring different perspectives.
I’m passionate about democratizing planning. I think everyone plays a role in shaping cities. However, not everyone understands city planning policies and processes. In 2017, the City of Indianapolis, in partnership with the Indianapolis Neighborhood Resource Center, established the People’s Planning Academy. The initial goal of the academy was to create a space for historically underrepresented communities to learn more about city planning and participate in upcoming land-use decisions and projects.

In 2021, we revised the training curriculum to include a focus on local history. The team wanted the participants to understand the basics of city planning but believed it was also essential to examine how past decisions still affect the city. We invited neighborhood historians and other community experts to help craft a curriculum that examined the built environment through a historical lens. The class topics included the history of affordable housing, transportation, waterways, and housing discrimination in Indianapolis.

We also dedicated class time to equipping participants with tools to discover the unique history of their individual neighborhoods. They learned how to use city resources, local archives, and online data tools to conduct neighborhood research. Those resources were used to conduct research for their final projects.

I’m a bit of a history nerd. So, it was fun for me to watch the participants go on their own journeys exploring local history. Their final projects were really impressive. One person wrote an article explaining how housing policies impacted her family from 1910-2019. Another person made a video presentation about equity issues in the bicycle network.

I’m so proud to be a part of a training that empowers everyday people to become city planning ambassadors.
I think my career path was pretty typical to start. Then I got lucky. Three times.

When I was at Ball State, a summer internship was a class credit requirement. The first summer after starting in planning, I sent out a bunch of resumes to all of my local communities (Chicago suburbs). I had a few interviews but nothing worked out.

The next summer, I sent out letters again. I had an interview with the Village of Wilmette, a place I had interviewed the year before. This time, I got the job. It was a great environment, and I learned a lot of the basics of local government planning. The following year my parents moved, and it wasn’t feasible for me to go back to Wilmette. I was fortunate to get a job in the planning office for the City of Elgin, which was a much different environment from Wilmette.

At the time I graduated Ball State, I still didn’t have a planning job. I was working at the mall when my Wilmette boss called to say they had a job opening. I got the job and stayed for four years, first as associate planner then as assistant planner.

I left to get a master’s degree in planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I had gone to North Carolina thinking I might stay down there. As beautiful as North Carolina can be, I decided that I’d rather be back in Chicago.

That spring before graduating, I had seen my supervisor from Wilmette at the national conference in New York. He told me that the department assistant director was leaving soon. When I came back to Chicago, I interviewed for the assistant director position and got the job.

After a few years, I did a brief two-year run as the director, and then the director came back and I got my job as assistant director back.

I have now been with Wilmette for a total of 25 years. In my observation, this is unusual. People tend to stay with local government jobs 3, maybe 5, 8 or 10 years. In my case, I have a great boss.

My primary job duties are to staff the Zoning Board of Appeals, staff the Administrative Zoning Review Committee, and process temporary use requests including filming requests.

I’m fortunate to lead or work on other projects as they come up: 2009-2013 zoning ordinance update, 2020 Census promotion, currently working on the village’s 150th celebration, and we are just starting a new comprehensive plan process.
I’m most proud of the work I did on our zoning ordinance update. For the last 90 years, the village had basically two or three single family zoning districts. This was fine but as the zoning tools evolved, having so few districts didn’t allow for enough tailoring to the existing housing stock.

The consultant did an analysis of existing lot sizes and grouped areas together by similar development patterns. The consultant then proposed a completely new way of regulating bulk that we on the staff disagreed with.

Instead, we took the areas grouped by the consultant and proposed a separate package of lot size requirements, setback, bulk, and height requirements for each area based on our assessment of the existing housing stock, using the existing zoning tools we had. We ended up created 11 single-family zoning districts.

I’m proud of this because it was a solution better suited to the needs and desires of the community (and staff), and it accomplished the primary goals of the re-write: 1) craft the regulations to reduce the non-conformities for existing houses and 2) craft the regulations so that new homes would better fit the neighborhood.

What qualities do you look for in a job candidate?

I look for people with customer service skills; being able to talk to people, project professionalism and helpfulness. Experience dealing with angry and upset people is a plus. Being empathetic is helpful. When it comes to property issues, people can be emotional. They may be attached to a vision of what they want to do and they don’t understand the purpose of the regulations. You won’t always be able to solve their problem, but you can offer suggestions (when possible) and assure them that they have been heard.

Good writing and graphic skills are always desirable. I like people who show initiative. Once in a position, own that position. You don’t have to know everything, you need to be able to ask good questions and offer up an idea on how you think something should be resolved. Offer to help other staff if you have time, even if it’s just returning phone calls or doing public notice postings.
Craig Sklenar: Tell us about your career trajectory

After my degree at BSU, I went to Denver to obtain my master’s degrees in Urban Planning and Urban Design. During this time I was hired in 2005 as an intern at the prestigious Landscape Architecture/Urban Design Firm where I worked on various projects across the US. In 2007 I took the opportunity to help open a Chicago office, but as a new employee and the economic downturn of 2008, I was laid off.

After six months of searching, I landed a job with the City of Evanston, Ill., as a general planner. The title said it all – I managed applications for new development, helped our affordable housing and economic development departments on various efforts and even flexed my urban design muscles with the public works department by redesigning the downtown streetscapes and the installation of small plazas in the western communities.

Budget cuts led to another path – I was looking for a job again in 2012. This time, my search was broad and varied, and I ended up applying for a job with the City of Calgary in Alberta, Canada, which at the time was one of the fastest growing cities in North America. What I thought was a folly of sorts ended up with a job offer, an opportunity to grow in my career, more responsibility and a chance to live in a foreign country.

I took the job and in 2013 I moved to Calgary. The career opportunity resulted in significant growth in my skills, leadership opportunities and professional thought leadership in the City.

In 2015, the private sector came calling, and I was offered a chance to join a growing urban design practice at Stantec Consulting, a large design firm headquartered in Canada.

Since 2015, I have worked in the Ottawa and now Montreal offices where today I lead the urban design practice for the region and lead the global initiatives for Transit Oriented Communities where we have established a new approach to planning and design around transit development and community need.

Today, while I still lead design strategy and project delivery, my role is broad in scope. I have moved more into business development, obtaining new clients, writing thought leadership pieces, and seeking out new opportunities to build the transit-oriented community practice globally.

I currently have projects across the US, New Zealand and here in Canada. Daily I have to navigate project work, proposal writing, business planning and team management.
I have many favorite projects – but if I were to pick one, it is the Currie Barracks Redevelopment in Calgary. While not a project that I designed, I was the lead planner assigned while working for the City of Calgary.

This site is the largest heritage site in Alberta, and everyone in Calgary has a story to tell about it (their mom worked there, they had a teenage job in the cafeteria, their grandfather served in the war and was station there, etc.)

This site is in the middle of well-established communities and the redesign of the last phase sought to triple density, create an urban node that is a transformational opportunity while still retaining a large component of open space, heritage buildings and adding space for a wide variety of housing, retail and jobs.

Naturally change can be scary, and community opposition was high. I dedicated ten months of applicant negotiations, rewriting zoning codes, community meetings, consultations, design changes and internal negotiations with various department resulted in an approval by planning commission and council with unanimous support. It even resulted in a letter of praise from the local community association sent to the mayor noting how my leadership and willingness to engage provided them the comfort to recommend approval of the project.

This to me is the role of an urban planner and civil servant: providing a high quality customer service experience, helping communicate effectively and facilitate negotiations to achieve consensus-driven outcomes. I am very proud of this process and use this same approach for all projects I manage.

Don’t be afraid to leap. I had a couple moments in my career that interrupted what I thought my career path was. It forced me to think outside of that plan, consider other options and when opportunity presented itself (like moving to Canada, or working in the public sector), I leapt. Each leap opened doors I never knew I could have access to.
The future of MOBILITY depends on planners who create resilient transportation opportunities for all people. Improving mobility can have a huge impact on the ability of people to hold jobs.

Ellen Forthofer: Tell us about your career trajectory

Like many planners, I found the profession by originally being attracted to architecture. In my first year at Ball State, I fell in love with the scale and scope of urban planning in my introductory courses, and the rest is history! I’ve always been enamored with strategic systems thinking, and I’m passionate in applying that type of thinking to the built environment in meaningful ways to build a more equitable community.

I graduated from Ball State with a Bachelor of Urban Planning and Development and a Master of Urban Design; both of these degrees refined my skills in communication and design which have played a pivotal role in my subsequent career.

Early in my career, I became heavily involved with American Planning Association national leadership. I served in many capacities over six years - board director, student representatives council chair and past chair, regional representative, and contributor to numerous task forces and committees - and during that time helped to develop and launch two national membership programs.

Meanwhile, I was also cutting my teeth in the planning world with initial internships focused on community accessibility and equity at the Indianapolis Cultural Trail, as well as an anti-hunger nonprofit based in Nashville called Community Food Advocates.

In grad school, I worked at the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization, who at the time were in strong partnership with IndyGo on a public education campaign about the Marion County Transit Plan ahead of a public referendum for the city’s first dedicated transit funding. After realizing my passion for creating more mobility choice within communities, I worked for IndyGo for nearly three years as the transit agency took initial steps towards building the city’s first bus rapid transit line.

In 2018, I had the chance to bring together my love for transportation projects and the great outdoors with a move to Denver to work for the City’s Department of Transportation and Infrastructure. While there, I helped to design and install bike infrastructure and transit improvements, and work with the community to plan for future transportation needs.

Recently, I began working for the Downtown Denver Partnership - a nonprofit organization that serves as a Transportation Management Association and Business Improvement District, among many other important roles in creating a vibrant downtown environment.
While working at IndyGo, I was project manager for Food in Transit, an innovative effort to bring access to healthy, fresh food to transit riders at the Julia M. Carson Transit Center in downtown Indianapolis. After conducting research to show that transit riders are disproportionately affected by Indianapolis food insecurity issues, my work began in highlighting the ways a transit agency could potentially help to solve these problems for its riders. Recognizing that food insecurity was highly correlated with food deserts and access issues, I designed the program to meet people where they are with a predictable, regular schedule. In partnership with a local grower - Growing Places Indy - and the City of Indianapolis, I led efforts to bring low-cost, fresh produce and food education to the largest transfer point in the transit network weekly during growing season. The program is anticipated to start its fifth season this summer, and accepts all forms of payment, including SNAP EBT benefits.

I’m proud of this project because it challenges the typical silos that are often present in community building. By thinking outside of the box and bringing partners to the table who have varying expertise and knowledge, we were able to create one small solution to an enormous and systemic problem, and challenge the typical roles of public and nonprofit sectors. This led to a final product that met riders’ needs without creating additional hurdles to access.

Try a little bit of everything to hone in on your passions – take an off-the-wall class that interests you, sign up for volunteer opportunities and internships in as many focus areas of planning as you can. You may surprise yourself with what you find!

Throughout school, I was nearly certain that I could succeed in many areas of planning, but I was absolutely certain that I would never step into transportation planning. My only exposure to transportation planning to that point had been traffic analysis courses that made me want to snooze just reading the title! Little did I know multimodal transportation planning is the perfect intersection of my interests, skills and passions; and there’s so much more in transportation planning than just traffic analysis for someone who is passionate about creating equitable and safe communities, and primarily walks, bikes, and takes transit to get around.
The future of MOBILITY depends on planners who create resilient transportation opportunities for all people. Improving mobility can have a huge impact on the ability of people to hold jobs.

Taylor Firestine: Tell us about your career trajectory

In high school, I was fortunate to be exposed to a number of volunteer opportunities, which helped develop my sense of service to the community. When I arrived at CAP, I was heartened by the college's critical focus on equity and intentional community-driven design. These experiences from high school and undergraduate education inspired me to pursue my master's in urban design.

My appreciation of and interest in public service landed me my first professional position as a planner with the Indianapolis Metropolitan Planning Organization (IMPO) where I had the privilege to project manage the baseline assessment of the Red Line Transit Impact Study, assist with the creation of the Transit-Oriented Development Map Series and Data Dashboard, manage the agency's request for qualifications/proposals process, and manage the organization's internship program.

After nearly three years of learning the ins and outs of federal and state transportation administration, a new door opened for me to gain experience in the nonprofit sector as a pedestrian and bicyclist program coordinator with Health by Design, also in Indianapolis.

As a walk and bike program coordinator with Health by Design, I'm fortunate to work in several different capacities every day. As an organization, our mission is driven by building and sustaining a built environment that promotes healthy, active living for everyone in our communities.

Much of my work centers on advocacy, whether that's letter writing to support Indianapolis planning staff's recommendations on a policy or zoning case or reviewing plans by our partner organizations to ensure public processes were transparent and equitable.

Along with colleagues, I also work directly with Hoosiers across Indiana to provide technical assistance, like drafting Complete Streets policies for local jurisdictions, or conducting walk audits in areas experiencing high rates of crashes between pedestrians and motorists.

I've also helped lead our Indianapolis-specific Walkability Champion program in which participants are educated on planning best practices that support walkability and pedestrian safety and then lead a public outreach, engagement, and action planning process in their neighborhoods.
What advice do you have for students?

Be generous with your time, skills, and passions. Especially to yourself. You can't be a positive force for change in your community if you've neglected your own health and wellbeing. Further, it's easier to become jaded and burned out in the absence of time spent replenishing your soul. That's how you stay inspired and motivated to do your very best work.

I never could have imagined a decade ago that I'd be working as an advocate in transportation and land use planning for a nonprofit focused on improving public health outcomes. But that's the beauty of a planning education--the opportunities to apply your unique skillset within the profession are seemingly endless!

Taylor: Walkability champion program makes me proud

Though it was an enormous undertaking in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic (with many hiccups along the way), my favorite project has been helping manage Health by Design's Walkability Champion program.

Working on the fly to produce and plan an all-virtual program--that had traditionally been done in-person--was the challenge of my career (so far), but through the messiness, there were several successes and lessons learned.

One Walkability Champion team rolled with the punches and saw one of their action plan items grow from the seed of an idea to a grant-winning proposal in a matter of months (in the middle of a global pandemic!) I couldn't have been more proud of their devotion to the neighbors, determination, and tenacity to see the planning process through.

Taylor Firestine
Walk & Bike Program Coordinator

"For me, the best part of walking and biking is the ability to be present in the moment and appreciate life's little beauties. A ten-minute walk to the bus stop or 25-minute bike ride allows me to move at a slower pace—perfect for quiet contemplation.

I advocate for walking, rolling, and biking because my neighbors should have comfortable and safe options to decide whatever mode is best for them. Many people don't have the ability or desire to drive, so we need to build communities with everyone in mind."

#WhyIBike #WhyIBike #WhyIBike
First, it is nothing like what I thought it would be. I started my career at the Michiana Area Council of Governments as a Regional Planner focusing on travel demand modeling and other transportation activities. I quickly moved into general transportation planning areas involving the development of required Metropolitan Planning Organization plans and reports.

When I moved into the role of MPO Coordinator at the Southern Georgia Regional Commission, I took on more leadership responsibilities that included staff oversight and driving the vision for transportation in a small metropolitan community. Today, I lead a staff six where we are responsible for transportation and environmental planning in 18-counties and operating a 14-county regional public transit system.

My current position entails juggling various aspects of transportation and environmental planning and public transit operations throughout 18-counties in South Georgia. We are currently working on the implementation of the billion-dollar Vision2045 Metropolitan Transportation Plan for Valdosta and Lowndes County, Georgia. In our rural communities, we are planning safe bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure through data-driven roadway assessments and localized marketing campaigns that promote safety.

Our environmental projects include working with local, state and federal partners to determine the feasibility of improvements to a dam built in 1860 to increase water flow in a sub-watershed of the historic Suwanee River. Our latest endeavor has been the launch of a regional public transit system that is providing accessible mobility options to residents throughout our region.

In July 2022, Corey accepted a new position. He is currently a transportation planning lead with WSP.

I really enjoyed the field trips students in CAP are encouraged to take. I learned so much from experiencing different cities and learning from real world examples of successes and failures in planning.
I think that I am most proud of a project that took two tries to get it right. In 2010 the Georgia Legislature passed enabling legislation that would allow defined regions to develop a transportation improvement project list that voters would be able to approve a 1% sales tax to fund.

The first time our region went through this process the voters turned down the tax (even though all of the local governments had a history of passing project specific sales taxes for decades). In 2018, the region had another opportunity to develop a transportation improvement project list that was developed after better identifying the transportation needs in the region.

The elected officials asked me to chair a regional roundtable of elected officials that developed a project list to put on the ballot. The sales tax referendum passed with a healthy majority and included sidewalks in small towns, new bridges, dirt roads to be paved, congestion relief in larger communities, and discretionary money for cities and counties to buy new equipment and supplies to maintain their local roads.

I was honored to have been chosen by elected officials to lead the project development process for this regional effort that brought much needed investment to some of the poorest counties in the US.
The future of EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION depends on planners who use their communications and organizational skills to make sure everyone has a seat at the table and that resources are used equitably. You can find these planners spread across a wide range of fields.

Bithia Ratnasamy: Tell us about your career

My career has been grounded by my values of equity, justice, and compassion. While studying at CAP, I envisioned myself in the non-profit community development world, but was fortunate to learn about the role that government can play in advancing equity through public sector housing and community development programs and policies while completing an internship with Focused Community Strategies, an organization in Historic South Atlanta.

After graduating from CAP in December 2012, I moved to Arizona to serve as an AmeriCorps VISTA with the City of Phoenix Department of Planning and Development. In this role, I focused on increasing meaningful engagement opportunities for residents who had not previously been centered in community planning processes - communities of color (including immigrant and refugee families), youth, and seniors.

Through this work, I gained a deeper understanding of the intersections between policy, process, and politics and eagerly accepted a role in the Phoenix City Council District 5 Office.

As a council staffer, I researched/advised on planning-related policy issues, fostered community partnerships to strengthen the quality of life in the district, and worked to increase resident access to City services.

During graduate school, I completed a community engagement fellowship with Atlanta BeltLine, Inc., a quasi-governmental organization leading the planning and implementation of the BeltLine, one of the country's largest planning and re-development projects centered around a 22-mile multi-use trail.

After completing my master’s degree in planning, I returned to Atlanta to work for the Deputy Commissioner of Housing at the Georgia Department of Community Affairs where I worked on state and federal policy, internal coordination strategies, and community engagement and external communication initiatives. I returned to local government in the summer of 2019 to work for Atlanta’s first Chief Housing Officer within the Office of the Mayor. Since the beginning of 2021, I have been serving as the Director of Housing at the Atlanta Housing Authority.
Bithia, what is your current job like?

Ensuring that residents can afford safe, quality homes is essential to building more inclusive cities. As Director of Housing, I lead the implementation and performance management of the One Atlanta: Housing Affordability Action Plan, an inter-agency housing strategy developed by the Mayor's Office, Department of City Planning, Atlanta Housing Authority, Invest Atlanta (economic development authority), Metro Atlanta Land Bank Authority, and Atlanta BeltLine, Inc. that includes actions ranging from advancing equitable zoning policies to increasing access to homeownership.

Additionally, I work on special initiatives with my colleagues who are focused on policy, real estate, and communications. In this role, my priorities are centering racial equity in policy decisions, building a culture of collaboration amongst our inter-agency team, and increasing accountability through transparent reporting.

What project are you most proud of?

While working in the Mayor's Office, I managed the Atlanta Housing Affordability Tracker, an interactive dashboard that shows exactly where the City and its sister agencies have invested in affordable housing since January 2018.

While I may not have called it my favorite project at the time, in retrospect, I am grateful for the ways it helped me develop new hard skills (dashboarding with Power BI and managing a database in Excel with numerous contributors) and strengthen soft skills (managing an inter-agency team and communicating challenges to my manager).

Beyond that, I am proud that we have been able to publicly report on the impact/stewardship of the housing agencies with a high level of confidence on a quarterly basis for the first time in the City's history. Additionally, I have been able to use the tracker as a tool to spur conversations around equitable investment, gentrification, and segregation.

Do you have a favorite CAP memory to share?

I'll never forget a walk that a group of us took with former Professor Francis Parker during a field trip to Boston. Though we had places to be, we ended up stopping spontaneously to hear a man playing a hurdy gurdy in the heart of Boston Common.

While there's so much to learn about cities and systems, it was an unexpected lesson in pausing to appreciate the joy and beauty found in the unexpected moments of urban life.
The future of LIVABILITY depends on planners who design resilient cities that can survive pandemics and climate change while creating places that mitigate the effects of these crises and preserve the best of our past.

Beth Johnson: Tell us about your career

One factor that drew me to Ball State was the minor program in Historic Preservation. From Ball State, I went directly to graduate school for historic preservation and then entered my career working for the City of San Antonio in the neighborhood planning section focusing my work on long range planning and neighborhood conservation districts.

From San Antonio, I moved to Covington, Kentucky, to be their Preservation and Planning specialist running their local historic preservation program and also working on short term and long-range planning initiatives.

After seven years in Covington, I moved to Austin to become the Deputy Historic Preservation Officer for the city, but I was drawn back to the Cincinnati region a year later to become the Urban Conservator for Cincinnati running the location preservation office.

As the Urban Conservator for Cincinnati, I am housed in the Cincinnati Planning and Engagement Department and work closely with the Department of Buildings and Inspections. My job includes the following:

- Provides professional guidance and recommendations to the Historic Conservation Board and City Planning Commission
- Initiates, develops executes and administers policies and plans of action that establish historic preservation objectives
- Prepares and supervises preparation of reports on historic designation, certificates of appropriateness, and other actions that affect Cincinnati's historic resources
- Prepares conservation studies and develops conservation guidelines
- Assures compliance of the City's programs with federal and state regulations mandating protection of historic resources
- Reviews and approves minor alterations to historic buildings
- Advises city departments, on effects of projects on historic resources
- Represents the City and Historic Conservation Board to federal, state and local agencies
- Initiates and directs public education and information programs
- Provides technical assistance to homeowners, developers and other interested parties
Beth, tell us about a project you're proud of

A recent favorite project was the rehabilitation and “face-lift” of the oldest Jewish Cemetery east of the Allegheny mountains as part of the Jewish Bicentennial celebration.

The project started with just a call from the Jewish Cemeteries of Greater Cincinnati wanting input and advice on the planned plaza and upgrades. Through our discussions and a site visit, I saw that there was a need for gravestone cleaning. My office had an AmeriCorps member (also a Ball State alumnus!) who had training and knowledge of gravestone cleaning, so we set up a few workshops and workdays to clean up the gravestones.

Meanwhile I worked with the designers and contractors on the design and upgrades to the plaza and information signage. The rededication of the cemetery with a new plaza and signage was the beginning of the celebration of the Jewish Bicentennial.

Advice for students who want a job like yours?

While at Ball State take advantage of the minor Historic Preservation. Most jobs in Historic Preservation will require a master’s degree, and the minor will give you a foot up in the knowledge when you enter a graduate program. Historic Preservation at a local/municipal level is rooted in planning and specifically zoning, so understanding planning law, traditional neighborhood and urban systems, walkability, and principals of economic development will be key tools needed at the local level.

Go to every hands-on event, networking event, lecture, and class possible. This is an industry based on relationships where job postings aren't the norm. Make yourself cards and follow-up with any communication.
When I graduated I really wanted to work at the largest of planning scales: either with the federal government or the United Nations. I had interned with the U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development in Washington DC as a undergraduate and enjoyed policymaking and being able to touch so many diverse people and places. During planning graduate school at the Ball State CAP Indianapolis Center, I had a graduate assistantship working with the city’s planning office focused on an update to the plan for downtown.

Upon graduation, that assistantship morphed into a role with Ball State and a role with the city to finish that work. Before long I was working full time with CAP Indy doing what I loved about my BSU education—getting students out helping real-world community partners. We helped on projects as diverse as walking door to door in neighborhoods to inventory abandoned homes to helping with the city’s cultural development programs. It was probably about as far from being a Fed as I could get, but I found my skills and interest worked at the hyper-local level as well as they did in DC. Soon I grew to direct the Indianapolis Center, helping to launch the College’s Urban Design program and continuing to align student learning with real-world needs.

After working with city government partners for a decade, I was asked to officially join them, leading a reimagined long-range planning team at the City of Indianapolis. Local government was never on my radar, and it’s an incredibly demanding place to be. But I thrived, leading a team of planners and consultants to pioneer a collective impact planning process called Plan 2020 and creation of some pretty consequential projects and policies. These sought to undo the legacy of harmful and racist policies and planning systems that have led to incredibly disparate life outcomes for black and brown residents.

I’ve always been a purpose-driven person, and in this work, I found my passion. I encourage every student to spend time in local government. It’s where the people need you the most. But I also encourage them to not stay there for life. It’s too easy to lose your edge, to get insulated by bureaucracy, and to get burnt out.

To that end, my latest chapter is with Visit Indy, the tourism agency (or “destination marketing organization” in industry lingo) for Indy. I’m in a brand new role for the company serving as Director of Destination Development, which is a fancy way of saying I work to make Indy a great place to live, work, and yes, visit.
Brad: Award winning 'People's Planning Academy' is a project I am proud of

Somehow I’ve managed to win three national planning awards. The one I am the proudest of is for a public education program we built while I was at the City of Indianapolis called the People’s Planning Academy. We were going into an update to our land use planning process and had always struggled with representative community engagement.

The dirty secret in planning is that it’s driven by who shows up, and the people showing up weren’t representative of the full spectrum of our community. But we couldn’t expect to throw newcomers into a process that veteran participants had spent decades perfecting.

To level the playing field we built a six-part training program that shared the basics of planning as well as how planning impacts communities. We used the comprehensive plan goals to share how planning can make neighborhoods more inclusive, resilient, healthier, and competitive.

We offered free on-site daycare to eliminate that barrier and when the free program filled up, we worked with our public access tv station to broadcast the programs and put them online. We developed a workbook, built low-cost games, and engaged community experts (including us planners) to teach the program.

At the end the graduates received a diploma signed by the mayor and were invited to sit in on what had historically been a closed-door process of experienced appointees. It was incredibly rewarding, and I believe the citizen planners we produced will be the most consequential thing we did to improve the long-term trajectory of our city.

I’ve always said I like being a mile wide and not a mile deep. We need people who are a mile deep and are authoritative experts. My strength isn’t that ... it is in making connections across those experts and those issues. I found my time outside of CAP to be as important as inside CAP because it allowed me to understand how natural resources and sociology and political science and technology and economics come together, often in unintended ways, in the real world. So take a wide variety of classes—they will be valuable in the most unexpected circumstances.
After graduating from Ball State in 2002 with a MURP degree, I began working for the City of South Bend as a long-range planner. At the time, South Bend did not have an active comprehensive plan and officials were in discussions on how to create the first one in over 40 years.

Over the next few years, I worked closely with other planners, city officials and community members to create an inclusive community process to develop a vision and policy guide for the next 20 years. In 2007 my role with the City evolved into a liaison with a local non-profit, Downtown South Bend, Inc., where I gained an insight into organizational and board management. Over the next four years, I built new partnerships with the local business community, managed grant programs and oversaw special events that highlighted the downtown even as it struggled to invite new investment.

In 2011, I transitioned to a more traditional planning role with the City in economic development, working on master planning the City’s new technology park and business growth. In 2012, a new Mayor took office and reorganized the community and economic development efforts into a new department which included for the first time a dedicated Office of Planning. I was named the Planning Director by Mayor Pete Buttigieg and had the pleasure of working on transformative placemaking and transportation projects, including the conversion of one-way streets in the downtown to two-way.

Our efforts to have a more collaborative approach between planners and engineers on projects and initiatives opened up a higher management position for me with the City in 2016. The position as Deputy Director of Public Works was an opportunity to expand my management and operational skills while continuing the important work to transform South Bend.

Today, as Deputy Director of Public Works, I provide oversight for departmental operations that include design and maintenance of public infrastructure, street maintenance, refuse collection and the provision of water and wastewater functions. Even in a Public Works role, I utilize planning knowledge, principles and ethics to make daily decisions on how to provide better services for our residents and improve their quality of life. I continue to work closely with the City’s Planning team on a wide variety of plans and initiatives.

The future of the ECONOMY depends on thriving communities. You’ll find planners in real estate development companies, all levels of government, and fields such as tourism, military, hospitals, and aviation.

Jitin Kain: Tell us about your career
As Planning Director, I lead several planning and transportation initiatives in Mayor Pete Buttigieg’s administration, including the introduction of shared mobility options. I am proudest of the City’s Smart Streets initiative that realigned downtown South Bend streets, a $25 million project that has already resulted in over $150 million in private investment. I led the planning, design and implementation efforts of this project that has created a safe environment for pedestrians and bicyclists, allowing over 500 new residential units to be built in the last few years. New residents have brought vitality to the downtown which has further triggered retail and mixed-use investment.

In 2015, the Smart Streets project received a Mayor Challenge Award from the USDOT for “Overall Success” in creating streets that are safer and friendlier to pedestrians and bicyclists and for improving the community’s quality of life.

My favorite CAP memory is taking a field trip to Goshen, Indiana, with a small group to conduct a mini charrette. We worked with neighbors and community leaders to redesign a portion of US-33 that goes through the heart of the city. The charrette format meant we had little time to get an understanding of issues and present ideas the community could benefit from. Our team was welcomed by the community and applauded for the design solutions presented. The trip gave me my first real life exposure to collaborative planning and its power to transform communities.
During my first year at Ball State University, my long-held interest in architecture and my passion for people and communities came together, sparking a new interest in understanding the built environment.

I was fascinated by the dynamics of governmental systems and how policies affect people’s lives and choices. This led me to pursue a degree in Urban Planning & Development, which would allow me to establish a holistic understanding and approach to serving other individuals and communities.

My past leadership experiences have offered insight into the legal and economic tools that guide community development and placemaking. My work with the Indiana State House of Representatives, Indiana State Department of Agriculture, the Fulbright Scholarship Program, the Indiana Chamber’s Technology & Innovation Council and now TechPoint have further confirmed my devotion to public service.

In 2012, I was fortunate to join Indy’s rapidly emerging tech community as a Field Marketing Specialist at ExactTarget, which was at the time the darling tech scale-up company who had just gone public. Six months later, Salesforce acquired ExactTarget, and my tech career was fast-tracked as I started traveling about 50 percent of the time from coast to coast and throughout Canada supporting six regional sales teams with go-to-market strategy and resources. In 2015, I was 26 years old with a corporate AMEX flying to the most spectacular cities and living one heck of an incredible life but felt an insatiable tug to develop my professional brand. After lots of exploring, reading and praying, the most tangible way to manifest this calling was to hire a career coach.

In these few months of working with Caroline Dowd Higgins (a local career coach), I learned to embrace being a beginner again and hone in on my transferable skills. Doing so empowered me to enter the most creative and enriching period of my life. Simultaneously, my twin sister connected me to Mike Langellier, CEO of TechPoint, as he was looking to grow their five-person team. I recall Mike sharing his vision for the organization and the role during our first few conversations and even though there wasn’t a job description yet posted for the role, I wrote my own and sent it to him! Reflecting over the past five plus years since that day I said yes to my dream job, I am extremely grateful for being in a position where I can create solutions as a change agent and contribute to broader community and societal issues that I care deeply about.

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Lauren James: Tell us about your career
What is your job like?

In my current role* as Vice President, Stakeholder Engagement, I lead TechPoint’s Relationship Management team and am responsible for our key stakeholders which include 150+ members, sponsors, partners and hiring companies. My day-to-day responsibilities are varied including securing annual fundraising commitments and project managing a variety of economic development, talent attraction and community engagement initiatives in an effort to make Indiana a top state for tech amongst mid-sized states.

Lauren: Giving back to a great city gives me pride

I’m a firm believer that this city has given us a gift, and if we do our job well, we get to give that gift right back. I’m fortunate that in my role I not only get to work at the epicenter of the tech community, but I also get to represent our ecosystem in conversations and efforts with public, private and philanthropic sector leaders.

What I’m most proud of is that I work for an organization that allows me to bring my passions and soul to work every day, which often means stepping away from work to lead committee meetings and attend board meetings for charges that are supporting place-making and helping people and our community thrive.

*As of June 1, 2022, Lauren James is now the executive director of the Mitch Daniels Leadership Foundation

Advice for students who want a job like yours?

- Embrace being a beginner again, because it will allow you to enter into some of the most creative and enriching periods of your life
- Focus on asking the right questions and be okay if the answers don’t come immediately
- Hone in on, and sharpen, your transferable skills
- Show up, be genuine and get involved... it’s a magical trifecta for opportunities to emerge!
- Find what gives you joy and energy...because that’s when you’ll feel most alive!
The future of the ECONOMY depends on thriving communities. You’ll find planners in real estate development companies, all levels of government, and fields such as tourism, military, hospitals, and aviation.

Jake Dietrich: Tell us about your career

My path started at a young age. Growing up in the “Midwestern Mecca of Architecture” – Columbus, Ind. – I was immersed in a context of brilliant design on a daily basis. Buildings stamped by Saarinens, Pei, Meier, and Weese cultivated my interest in art. My father’s work as a forester and contractor led me to appreciate nature and the systems that bring buildings together. Finally, thanks to a great vocational skills program in my high school, I worked my schedule around being able to take architectural drawing classes.

After attending the CAP Summer Design Workshop, I knew Ball State was the place for me to figure out how all of my interests could align in a way that would allow me best contribute to the built environment. After selecting the urban planning and development degree path, and flipping houses for a real estate investor during my freshman and sophomore summer months, the early part of my college journey had all signs pointing towards a career in real estate development.

During my junior year, I was hired for a summer internship at Milhaus, a BUPD alumni-led multifamily development company that was just a startup at the time. That internship would eventually lead into a full-time job managing the development of new apartment buildings in urban core neighborhoods. The work was different every day, challenging, frustrating, and inspiring. I loved every bit of it. After managing several projects, I knew that I wanted to take a leading role in deal making and negotiation for these projects. So, I chose to go back to school and earn my law degree – while still working full-time for Milhaus. My law school classes, much like those at CAP, taught me to think in ways that would set my real estate projects up for success. Over the past decade, I’ve been blessed to continuously grow in responsibility and lead the development of more than 3,000 housing units across the Midwest.

Today, as vice president of acquisitions and development at Onyx+East, my role includes establishing market strategies and leading a team focused on the identification and development of land opportunities. Our company builds infill for-sale townhomes and single-family homes and build-to-rent attached and detached homes – often figuring out the tough sites that other developers cannot. After negotiating with property owners to secure land, my team and I lead engineers and designers to obtain entitlements, approvals, and permits for our projects.
Jake: Thankful for Mass Ave. project at age 23

Soon after graduating with my BUPD from CAP, I was tasked with leading the development of a new multi-family community – Circa – located just off of Massachusetts Avenue in downtown Indianapolis. At the time, Mass Ave was in its infancy of its revitalization into the dense, vibrant, walkable cultural district that it is today. What makes this particular project especially memorable for me were the challenges and constraints associated with it – saving an historic building, working through the restrictions of a locally designated historic district, environmental remediation, juxtaposing all of that with new construction buildings with a modern design, and meeting the high expectations of our institutional investment partner – all while being just 23 years old. Despite some bumps along the way, it turned out really great. I’m so thankful to have had the opportunity to lead and learn from my mistakes at such an early age.

Do you have a favorite BSU memory to share?

At the beginning of junior year, I asked Scott Truex during studio if there were any alumni working in real estate development that he could connect me with so I could start lining up an internship for the next summer. Without a blink, the first name Scott mentioned was Tadd Miller. Scott mentioned Tadd had just launched a new development company, Milhaus, and introduced us. Thanks to that introduction, I’ve had the blessing of calling Tadd a mentor, boss, and friend for the past 12 years. I try to return the favor to Scott and other Ball State students as often as possible.

Advice for students who want a job like yours?

Seek out opportunities to surround yourself with good people that you want to learn from and spend time with – bosses, coworkers, partners, and clients. That’s when the magic happens.
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