

Layers of Learning: Student Reflections on Community-Engaged Coursework with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation)

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Simon Fraser University (SFU)'s planning program, situated in the School of Resource and Environmental Management (REM), is the only planning program in Canada that specializes in interdisciplinary training in policy, natural science, and social science.

REM provides practical, applied research opportunities in partnership with communities through individual projects and coursework to address pressing planning problems in dynamic, real-life situations, while delivering meaningful research to support communities. One way that REM does this is through community-engaged coursework. Throughout this article, we reflect on the benefits that this coursework provided for students, through highlighting work students completed from January to April, 2026. We also highlight the layers of learning that students received including working with communities, applying decolonizing and Indigenous planning principles in a specific context, and practicing interdisciplinary collaboration.

This project is a continuation of an ongoing research partnership between Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish Nation) and several REM instructors (including Sean Markey, Meg Holden, Phil Bradshaw, and Andréanne Doyon), starting in 2021. Since its start, five graduate and undergraduate classes have had the opportunity to work across departments in Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw. Through these class projects, students have gained experience in community-centred research. Participating in this project demonstrates the importance of long-term relationship building in community-engaged work to students, and also connects 'REMer's' to each other through a shared feeling of contribution. This work also provides students with exposure to real-world planning work in a supervised environment before entering the workforce.

From January to April 2026, students enrolled in the Sustainable Community Planning and Regional Development course

provided research support to Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw through a class project. Students were tasked with providing research support to assist Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw's Emergency Planning and Response team to reduce property-level flood exposure and build long-term flood management strategies. Over the course of the semester, the class completed two group assignments associated with this project: First, an in-depth document analysis of all relevant jurisdiction plans, policies, and bylaws to assess the level and quality of integration of flood management across Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw's territory and, second, a report on flood risk and management for key themes including fish habitat and fishing access; critical infrastructure; land use and development considerations on reserve lands; and the provincial policy context.

Participating in applied coursework enriched the learning experience beyond traditional research or group assignments. First, the community-engaged framing of the project heightened the importance of the assignment, and gave students a renewed sense of purpose. Because there was the potential for real-life consequences, this project encouraged students to try their best—not for their own achievement, but because the work carried weight outside of the classroom. It was more than an exercise for students to learn about the various planning tools and approaches for disaster mitigation and management; it was also an opportunity to gain valuable work experience, applying what they had learned over the course of their degree to support a community's current planning challenges.

In addition to supporting experiential and community-engaged learning, this project

provided an opportunity to engage in work with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw. REM students have varying levels of previous experience working with, and for, Indigenous Nations. Topics such as the decolonization of the planning practice and Indigenous planning theory are woven throughout REM's degrees. However, this experience allowed students to distinguish between learning broader theoretical concepts and practically apply these principles for Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw's specific and unique context. As students researched and reported on the multi-jurisdictional flood mitigation policies impacting Skwxwú7mesh territory, they engaged with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw plans and policies, including the Climate Legacy Strategy, Xay Temíxw (Sacred Land Use Plan), and Úxwumixw 2050, Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw's recent Generational Plan, which centre the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw's vision for their future. This helped to ground the research in alignment with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw values, plans and priorities.

Lastly, an important aspect of this project was the cross-disciplinary collaboration between planning and non-planning students. The class was split between planning and natural science students (including students researching fisheries management, wildfires, avalanches, and toxicology). In this way, this work replicated the context that students will likely find themselves in once they enter the workforce as many roles, whether focused on planning or resource management, require collaboration between disciplines, departments, and sectors. Together, they collaborated on research, reports, and final presentations—a process that required intentional

bridging between disciplines to share knowledge and methodologies, and to develop a cohesive communication style. In the end, the projects were richer because of their interdisciplinaryity. Students were required to step out of their comfort zones as they translated relevant research on different topics (e.g., fish sciences and fisheries management) into actionable information for planners working at the local level. Through this work, non-planners gained valuable insight into the local-level policies impacting their area of study and planners deepened their understanding of how plans and bylaws could be made to better support ecological health and achieve environmental goals.

Collaborative, community-engaged projects like these are important opportunities for students to think deeply and shape their planning work to fit the physical, ecological,

political, and cultural context of a community. These reciprocal, co-developed learning opportunities aim to enrich and support the goals of both parties and to foster a sense of partnership between the school and community partners. Working with Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw provided students with the opportunity to develop and nurture meaningful relationships and to immerse students in relevant, community-centred work. Through engaging in community-centred coursework, students can connect more deeply to their schoolwork and the application of theories of decolonization and Indigenous Planning, while building relationships and strengthening peer-to-peer collaboration. We would like to thank Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw, the Emergency Planning and Response team and the Planning and Capital Projects Department. We are incredibly grateful for

this partnership and learning opportunity, and are eager to continue providing connected and relevant research with the REM planning program.

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Overlooking the Squamish River
on Skwxwú7mesh territory.

Credit: Sophia Gregory