

A Decade of Learning by Doing: The MCP Program at Vancouver Island University

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The Master of Community Planning (MCP) Program at Vancouver Island University (VIU) opened the doors to the first group of graduate students in Fall 2015. Since then, approximately 20 to 25 students each year joined together for a cohort-based adventure that focused on “Learning by Doing” while meeting all the requirements as an accredited planning program. The Program was crafted to balance academic studies with the practice of planning: the goal was building graduates who could hit the ground running as active contributors to both public and private practice.

VIU, as a “teaching university,” was able to embrace practitioners as the core team of instructors, within the structure and credibility of a university. The VIU ethos and curriculum focused on three dimensions: a high standard of academic education and learning, a comprehensive coverage of basic practical planning knowledge and skills, and

connections to the community through speakers and projects. The high academic requirements included full semester courses in history, theory and ethics, research methods, and law, and a 100-page academic policy paper following the structure of an academic thesis.

This is written in the past tense: sometimes good things come to an end.

Planning West readers are aware that VIU is discontinuing most of the graduate programs and shifting towards a smaller range of undergraduate degrees, along with expanded opportunities for transfer to other universities. Unfortunately, this includes the closure of the MCP Program: the current 2nd-year students are completing their degrees, and then the program will sunset in Spring 2026. While this closure is an unexpected outcome for everyone attached to the Program, there remains much to celebrate:

- Over 200 graduates are out in the world as planners: from sea to sea to sea across

Canada and around the globe, MCP grads are making a difference in every area of practice.

- Several grads have chosen an academic path and are pursuing PhDs.
- Two students achieved the Governor General Award, the highest honour that can be awarded to a graduate student.
- Students have served on both the Planning Institute of BC’s Council and on the Board of Directors for the Canadian Institute of Planners.
- The MCP Students’ Association has been active from the start, engaging students in tactical planning through engagement and activism, along with the occasional social event.
- The Mentors’ Banquet was a highlight in the Program each year. The mid-Island RPP community stepped up and served as mentors for the students, providing advice,



< Class of 2021 celebrating graduation day with a hat throwing!

^ Master of Community Planning students engaging the campus community on culture and belonging as part of their Community Engagement course

Top: Pam Shaw, Director of the Master of Community Planning (MCP) Program, at the 10-Year Reunion

recommendations, and cautionary tales. Some of these relationships have endured for a decade, and many have resulted in employment opportunities for students.

As to “Learning by Doing”, we have worked on projects with sixteen First Nations over the last decade, and we are especially grateful to the Snuneymuxw First Nation for opening the eyes, hearts, and minds of students to a wide variety of issues impacting the Nation. This includes the Snuneymuxw’s te’tuxwtun site adjacent to the VIU campus, a project that will reshape the mid-Island over the coming years.

And we have worked with communities across the Island – a partial list includes Nanaimo, Ucluelet, Parksville, Lantzville, Campbell River, Gold River, Cumberland, Qualicum Beach, Regional District of Nanaimo, Alberni Clayoquot and Duncan. Listing all our partners would result in an inventory of virtually every incorporated local government on the Island!

Added to this are over 200 internships, scores of Op Eds published in the Nanaimo News Bulletin, and the contributions that graduate students have made to the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region (one of Canada’s 19 UN-designated biosphere reserves).

And we will take this opportunity to offer our eternal and heartfelt gratitude to our faculty, former faculty, guest speakers, thesis supervisors, committee members, colloquium presenters, instructors, and mentors who contributed significant value and time to the education and well-being of our students – a list of people that would encompass a good portion of the membership of PIBC.

I am especially grateful to our Practitioner in Residence, Pat Maloney RPP, FCIP; the bi-weekly “Coffee with Pat” was a place of debate and knowledge transfer. And finally, a thank you to Dave Witty RPP, FCIP, who was there from the start. The Planning Studio at VIU has been officially designated the Dave Witty Studio in honour of his contributions.

The recent 10 Year MCP Reunion was the social event of the decade for us, bringing everyone to Nanaimo to celebrate our decade together, and now to look ahead to the next chapter! It was a delight to connect with all 10 cohorts as well as PIBC President Kenna

Jonkman RPP, MCIP and Dave Crossley, Executive Director, along with the local RPPs. Highlights included Uytay Lee’s stellar presentation, a high-stress round of Kahoot!, late-night karaoke, and a picnic in the park.

While we celebrate the past, the focus is now on the future. Following notice of the graduate programs’ termination, the MCP leadership group immediately connected with other post-secondary institutions on their interest in the program.

Working sessions commenced immediately with UVic’s Department of Geography, and a full application is now moving forward within the university. The program will evolve to fit within UVic’s structure and protocols, and to take advantage of the broad range of other faculties, departments, and programs that offer cross-listing opportunities for courses and instructors.

A Master’s in Community Planning program at UVic can offer opportunities centered within BC’s Capital Region with 14 local governments, over 20 First Nations, and the provincial government: the geographic location offers a unique setting for studying planning theory and practice through hands-on education grounded in real-world challenges. Remaining on the Island allows the school to continue working with many mid- and north Island communities.

Conversations are also ongoing with Royal Roads University for opportunities within their focus and expertise in leadership programs.

Why is this important? Vancouver Island continues to be a popular destination for retirees, digital nomads, and others seeking a West Coast lifestyle. However, it is a finite space that needs planners who can think about these edges while addressing the range of issues that planners are facing everywhere – human rights, massive disparities, food security, equity, inclusion, justice, diversity, housing, sustainability, biodiversity, along with the social, economic, and environmental upheavals that the world is facing. Fortunately and unfortunately, this expansive list of complex problems creates many opportunities for students and planners.

The past ten years have been an amazing adventure, and the future is filled with new pathways and horizons. We’ll keep the planning community informed and look forward to what this year will bring.

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