

The Chapter After Graduation



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One of the most common phrases college students come to know and love is, “the time spent in the classroom is just the beginning of a lifelong journey of learning, growing, and re-learning.” Much of life as a young adult, in general, mirrors that insight. However, one of the least tangible things about nearing one’s sunset of their college career is anticipating what the transition and expectations of the workforce will entail.

By and large, the college experience is very structured. Responsibilities, timelines, and steps for success are typically laid out by professors, faculty, or staff at the beginning of a semester or before a research project takes off. There are no true mysteries for how to excel, but each person must decide for themselves the amount of effort they are willing to dedicate to reap the outcome they desire.

The Center for Community & Economic Development (CCED) offers a unique bridge between the spelled-out structure and expectations common in settings of higher education and needing to lean into one’s curiosities, knowledge, and humility to grow, learn, and discover new lenses and opportunities in addressing challenges faced by communities. This blend of explicit expectations and open-endedness, coupled with mentorship offered by the Center’s staff and community and university partnerships, helps unknowing young adults get a taste of what to expect in the chapter following graduation. Working at the Center softens the transition to the professional world by encouraging students to synthesize their skills, knowledge, inquisitiveness, determination, and thirst for growth, the same attributes essential to embracing the leap forward into the professional community.

Personally, with interdisciplinary educational backgrounds, asking difficult questions and

having a deep desire to explore the multiplicity of factors wrapped into the policies, processes, and outcomes came naturally; however, engaging with partners of and staff at the Center cultivated and refined these characteristics, while drawing connections between these traditional research traits and applied practices in the professional world. For example, a key foundation in all research work is exploring gaps in what is “known” about a topic, framed as a question. Many times, the pursuit of addressing these gaps is accomplished through the pursuit of coalition-building and external funds.

The professional world of planning requires one to pursue the same steps. Listen to the community, including members of the public and partners; identify priority goals and appropriate, attainable steps and timelines in partnership with the broader community to work towards accomplishing the goals; assess gaps faced in addressing the community’s goals and the appropriate role the agency or department can provide in filling one or more gaps; and evaluate the resources, structures, and partners needed to successfully close those gaps, while leveraging existing relationships, capacity, and other funds/materials. With tailoring, these steps commonly drive the core strategic planning processes most departments and agencies are required to routinely complete, update, and maintain on behalf of their communities.

Master plans, Comprehensive Economic Development Strategies (CEDs), and Metropolitan Transportation Plans (MTPs) are just a few real-world examples of community blueprints that require the community engagement, partnership identification and building, critical thinking and analysis, storytelling, communication, and outreach, data gathering, and synthesizing skills the Center helps to cultivate in its students. These mentored experiences ease the transition into the real-world of planning and set the tone that one can never expect to know everything, must be open to learning and growing, which can be uncomfortable, and should always expect to leave a room with more questions than with which they entered. These themes lie at the core of being a dynamic, responsive planner and partner in and with your community. Embrace the next chapter with these principles in mind and you will thrive.

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