

# CREATING A CONNECTED CAMPUS: THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING FOR UNIVERSITIES

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When the words “urban planning” are mentioned, it is likely that municipal and land-use planning comes to mind. Although diverse types of planning are often discussed, one area of planning that appears to be underutilized is planning for universities. The built environment of a university has the ability to shape the experience of staff, faculty, students, and visitors in many different ways. Having a successful campus plan can improve the quality of life and change the way people move around and spend time at a university.

Universities are unique places with people from different backgrounds, lifestyles, and incomes (Balsas, 2002). Campuses are distinct in the sense that they offer an ideal human scale and resemble a small community neighbourhood (Balsas, 2002). However, it is not uncommon for academic institutions to be viewed as a place that is removed from the real world (Bunnell and Lawson, 2006). Traditional designs of universities have reinforced this perception by separating the campus from the neighbouring community (Bunnell and Lawson, 2006). Furthermore, many universities have focused on policies that involve increasing diversity, improving safety, and achieving higher graduation rates (Dalton et. al, 2018). Although planning is not directly linked to those issues, literature shows that campus planning can offer a supportive and strong physical environment (Dalton et. al, 2018). It is only until recently that campus planning is beginning to garner some attention (Dalton et. al, 2018)

This is where our story begins. This summer, we were hired by the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere Region Research Institute (MABRRI)

at Vancouver Island University (VIU) to create a Campus Mobility Plan and a Public Realm Plan. As VIU Master of Community Planning students, we have spent a considerable amount of time on campus. However, working on both of these plans gave us the opportunity to see the campus in a new light.

The Mobility Plan has a strong focus on transportation demand management because VIU is a commuter university - many of the users travel to attend classes. Because of this reality, we provided recommendations for car sharing programs and active transportation that would reduce the use of single occupancy vehicles. Active transportation refers to getting to one place from another with your own power such as walking and biking (Government of Canada, 2018). Cars are often the main influence and focus of planning decisions for transportation systems. (Balsas, 2002). Over the past fifteen years, it has been difficult for campuses to offer access and mobility without tarnishing the community feel of a campus. Active transportation was relevant in our Public Realm Plan as well, because parking spaces could be turned into pedestrian friendly public areas. Our goal was to make VIU a place for people and favour pedestrians, since walking is the expected way to move around campus.

In the Mobility Plan, there is a chapter devoted to universal accessibility. VIU is located on a steep hillside which makes it difficult for people with disabilities to move around campus. We had the opportunity spend the day in a wheelchair and take the designated barrier free route from the lower to upper campus which changed our perspective of mobility at

VIU. We quickly realized how the campus's built environment greatly impacts the way universal access users have to move around the university. What would be a ten-minute walk up the stairs from the bottom to the top of campus, took over an hour in a wheelchair and involved elevators, steep slopes, and ramps. The recommendations we provided in this section included applying universal design to all areas of campus, planning for adverse weather conditions, and creating back up plans for elevators (because the barrier free route is inaccessible without working elevators). An area of great importance for the Mobility Plan was to improve way-finding and maps to help navigate the campus efficiently and safely for universal access users.

For the Public Realm Plan, we used photo surveys to identify existing public spaces and used the photos for design renderings. Taking photos gave us the opportunity to see the current state of campus and its public spaces, which allowed us to make informed recommendations on how to improve certain areas. We included a chapter called "Dream Plan" in which we recommended any idea that would improve the public realm. This included a chalkboard and outdoor movie wall (VIU has many blank walls), an outdoor observatory featuring seasonal star charts, and a rock-climbing wall in the campus breezeway.

Our experience working as campus planners was the perfect mix of collaborating with project stakeholders, conducting meaningful community engagement, and stretching our imagination and creativity to improve life on campus. Although each plan had a different focus area, it became apparent that both plans were connected because they informed each other in many ways. We were able to see the importance of community partnerships and their necessity in improving mobility and the public realm on campus. We believe that staff, faculty, students, and visitors can be stewards of planning by lending their voices to emphasize the importance of the human dimension by

planning for people. Planning is not just about local government and land-use, it's also about making places like VIU more inclusive and enjoyable.

## REFERENCES

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