Observations of a New Professional

by Gary Pivo

In 1979 I received my MRP degree from Cornell. Recently, I completed my first two years as a professional planner with the U.S. Forest Service.

Planning has become a very important function of the Forest Service. The passage of the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resource Planning Act of 1974, as amended by the National Forest Management Act of 1976, recognized the need for comprehensive natural resource planning. As a result, a major effort has been launched to produce long-range national, regional, and forest plans that are coordinated with one another and that recognize the interrelatedness of the various natural resources of our nation.

These laws and their implementing regulations required the Forest Service to do things it had never done before: for example, to tie planning directly to budgeting; to identify the capacity of our recreational resources; to use forest level data in national planning; and to relate regional and forest plans to the national plan. I have seen these policies stimulate the development of methods as planners tried to accomplish what policy-makers thought they ought to be able to do.

These new mandates have also created a personnel vacuum in the Forest Service. Because of competing needs, employment limitations, and a civil service position classification system that gives limited recognition to the existence of the planning profession, there aren’t enough trained planners available to do the job. Often I found myself planning with operations researchers, foresters, economists, and other technical specialists. There are, in fact, few planners doing planning in the federal government. Many of my colleagues were technicians interested in identifying the economically optimal solution or biologically correct answer. They followed a rational/empirical paradigm. For them the “preferred alternative” lay among the soil regimes and linear equations. Technical solutions were expected to be taken up and implemented.

My experience has produced a very different perspective. Successful plans are

adaptive, dynamic, and constantly updated, with the future as a guide. An effective planner is comfortable in the political as well as the technical arena. Planning is just as much a social as a scientific activity.

As the Forest Service adapted to planning, some of my colleagues had trouble envisioning alternative futures. When asked to name three alternative goals, they often talked about a slow, moderate, or fast track in the current direction. Planners can be helpful in assisting people to see real options.

In all the issues in which I was involved, there seemed to be an identifiable hierarchy of people, the “power elite,” who were traditionally more or less in control. Tradition appears to be waning, however, not because the hierarchy of roles is breaking down, but because those at the top are losing control.

Control over issues is becoming fragmented as congressional power is dispersed to subcommittee chairmen, as the bureaucracy becomes more complex, and as special interest groups and political action committees exert their influence. Planners could alleviate this quagmire of ineffectiveness by working with those who are truly, not necessarily traditionally, able to implement plans.

For those who are preparing for a planning career, I’d like to discuss a few skills that I’ve found most useful during these past two years. For those who are alumni, I offer some observations for comparison:

Numerous disciplines contribute to planning. It has helped to know the jargon and logic of the disciplines related to my area of interest.

Everyone wants to feel a part of the planning process. Interpersonal skills like reflective listening and interdisciplinary team management are vital. Participants are often frustrated by slow payoffs, so planners must learn to be motivators.

Effective communication through brief, simple language is especially important when working with top policy people and the public. Graphics are also handy.

The public is really the publics. I only get confused when I try to identify the public interest. I am more successful in working toward consent for a plan among competing interests. I consider “consent” to be the willingness not to veto a plan’s implementation rather than absolute agreement.

Since planners often consider alternative futures by manipulating social, economic, and ecological data, it is helpful to know how to manage data and models. The Forest Service, for instance, is committed to automated data systems, linear programming, and input-output models. The advent of computers and sophisticated planning has left managers with more than a little future shock. Many of them barely understand the technical systems they manage. Skills in social assessment methods are also scarce.

Developing a plan is a major task. Project management skills (e.g., supervision, PERT, and critical path) have been quite useful.

Plans are implemented and often revised through yearly budgeting. I have been more effective after learning about budgeting systems and how to transmit planned change into budgeted actions.

Planners are in the middle of a political arena. Patience and caution have helped me learn political savvy. On the other hand, it’s hard to have lightning without a storm! I am often most effective when I am willing to show "the right stuff."

During my work with the Forest Service, it became obvious to me that there was more I could learn. The multitude of concerns that merge during the development of a plan call for a “specialist in the general” who can coordinate these activities. Since I have seen some gaps in my own skills and wish to become better equipped to steer a planning system, I have returned to planning school this fall to study for a doctorate.

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Research on Residential Energy Demand and Microsimulation

Professor Sid Saltzman, on sabbatical leave in Washington, D.C., last year, was a Senior Fellow at the Policy Studies Division of Mathematica Policy Research. During his tenure at MPR, he supervised and participated in a variety of research projects, including a study of the effects of natural gas deregulation on households, the development of residential demand models for energy, and two studies concerned with conservation-retrofit issues: one in demand modelling, the other in cost/benefit analysis of furnace retrofits for low-income households receiving aid under HEAP/LIEAP programs.

Survey on Women in Planning

Last spring, the Cornell Women’s Planning Forum surveyed all women alumni of the department, as well as a control group of randomly selected male graduates, in an attempt to gauge the professional experiences of women planners. Of the three hundred questionnaires mailed, approximately twenty-four percent were returned. Besides answering the survey’s questions, many respondents made additional, enlightening comments about their Cornell and subsequent employment experiences.

Those who have not returned their questionnaires but wish to be included in the survey should do so as soon as possible.

Mexican Border Region

Professors Thomas Victorisz, William Goldsmith, and Ph.D. candidate Robert Burns worked with a team from the Mexican Treasury Department to analyze economic problems and then design a preliminary strategy for development of Mexico’s northern border region, an area plagued with problems of migration, unemployment, and severe competition from U.S. enterprise. The project focused on Mexico’s plans and instruments for influencing the location of major public and private industrial investments and infrastructure. An integral part of the work involved equipping the treasury staff with skills in regional analysis, including the development of micro-computer data processing operations.