

Sim City meets academia in U of A's new community planning program

Jonathan Faerber; Gateway Staff; Feb 08, 2012

If you've ever survived a lecture by playing Sim City, it might be worth your while to pay attention to the latest development in the University of Alberta academic scene: community planning.

The U of A's newest program, set to open to first and second-year students next fall, will prepare future planners for a community-building career that acting director Robert J. Summers calls "the real life job of Sim City."

The Planning B.A. and B.Sc (specialization) will be offered through the Department of Earth and Atmospheric Sciences this coming fall, and aims to integrate classroom learning with real world experience to prepare students for a career in planning or related municipal consulting roles.

Courses topics will range from urban development to regional issues to environmental planning.

The U of A's existing strengths in EAS and human geography, as well as several new courses and faces arriving in the fall, will provide students with access to the expertise they need to become successful planners, according to Summers.

The department also will be supported by industry, where there is a currently large demand for planners. Professionals will be slated to teach courses on a sessional basis.

Summers added that the discipline, although new at the U of A, has a significant history in Alberta, as well as Canada, with programs already up and running throughout the country as planning grows in importance.

"It's a long tradition. It goes back officially well over 100 years with town planners having a big influence on the development of communities," Summers said, adding that modern planning has evolved greatly since then.

"I think the way to put it is we used to build a lot of things without thinking about them. More and more we think about what we build — we communicate about it and deliberate with community members, and we attempt to do a better job because we've learned that we have to live with things we've built," Summers explained.

The new program will also have a positive impact on Edmonton, which currently employs about 150 planners, with the same number employed by private firms and consultants in the city.

It's the students coming out of the U of A's program and other universities who will be able to address the planning issues affecting Edmonton, according to Summers.

"The people who might want to become planners ... are people who walk around and look at this street and say, 'Why can't it be nicer?' or 'Why can't it be more sustainable?'" Summers explained.

"They look at the structure of our city ... and like to think about the environment around them and engage in it. They think, 'How does 118 Ave become more like Whyte Ave?' or the other way around," Summers added.

The U of A, however, has not applied for accreditation with the Alberta Professional Planner's Institute and the Canadian Institute of Planners, since the program is not yet operational.

Although this means that initial graduates may only receive provisional memberships with professional organizations before full membership is possible, Summer said the process is currently little more than a formality, given Alberta's high demand for planners.

"They just want graduates," Summers said of the industry. "It's an opportunity for Alberta students who want to study planning — you don't have to leave the province anymore to do an undergraduate degree, so it really opens doors for them."

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