

Reframing planning pedagogy: professional preparedness through non-studio based service-learning

by

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Abstract

Service-learning has emerged in planning and design education as a valuable pedagogical strategy for connecting classroom learning to community-engaged practice. However, the majority of scholarship in urban planning pedagogy privileges studio-based learning formats, leaving less empirical attention to how non-studio based service-learning contributes to student learning and professional preparation. This thesis examines the impact of non-studio based service-learning on the professional preparedness of planning students through a study examining PLAN 640, an interdisciplinary urban design seminar course at Kansas State University. Using a mixed-methods research design, this study draws on survey responses from 62 former students and 21 semi-structured interviews with former students across various academic backgrounds. Survey and interview data were used to analyze how students understood the relationship between course experience and later professional practice, with interview coding used to identify recurring themes across student accounts.

Key findings show that non-studio based service-learning contributed meaningfully to professional preparedness in several ways. First, students described stronger professional role clarification and clearer professional identity development through interdisciplinary, community-facing work. Second, students reported technical and soft skill development through the demands of a community-accountable project and interdisciplinary teamwork. Third, students described the course as meaningful and applied, especially through the course structure connecting theory to practice, emphasizing ethical responsibility, and preparing them for community-engaged professional work. Together, these findings indicate that non-studio based service-learning can promote a broad range of professional development opportunities often associated with studio-based service-learning pedagogy while offering unique advantages through meaningful experiences, discussions, and interdisciplinary teamwork.

Reframing Planning Pedagogy:

Professional Preparedness Through Non-
Studio Based Service-Learning

Avery J. Neer

A Master's Thesis



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Dedication

This thesis is lovingly dedicated to the memory of Allen Lewis Earle, my dear grandfather and biggest supporter in all my endeavors. Your voicemails and messages of daily encouragement will live forever in my inbox.

Abstract

Service-learning has emerged in planning and design education as a valuable pedagogical strategy for connecting classroom learning to community-engaged practice. However, the majority of scholarship in urban planning pedagogy privileges studio-based learning formats, leaving less empirical attention to how non-studio based service-learning contributes to student learning and professional preparation. This thesis examines the impact of non-studio based service-learning on the professional preparedness of planning students through a study examining PLAN 640, an interdisciplinary urban design seminar course at Kansas State University. Using a mixed-methods research design, this study draws on survey responses from 62 former students and 21 semi-structured interviews with former students across various academic backgrounds. Survey and interview data were used to analyze how students understood the relationship between course experience and later professional practice, with interview coding used to identify recurring themes across student accounts.

Key findings show that non-studio based service-learning contributed meaningfully to professional preparedness in several ways. First, students described stronger professional role clarification and clearer professional identity development through interdisciplinary, community-facing work. Second, students reported technical and soft skill development through the demands of a community-accountable project and interdisciplinary teamwork. Third, students described the course as meaningful and applied, especially through the course structure connecting theory to practice, emphasizing ethical responsibility, and preparing them for community-engaged professional work. Together, these findings indicate that non-studio based service-learning can promote a broad range of professional development opportunities often associated with studio-based service-learning pedagogy while offering unique advantages through meaningful experiences, discussions, and interdisciplinary teamwork.

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Chapter 01.

Introduction & Background

Introduction: The Value of Service-Learning

Throughout my five-year Master of Architecture program at Kansas State University (KSU), I participated in several design studios addressing built environment challenges such as housing affordability, climate change, and public amenities. While some of these projects involved site visits, conversations with community members, stakeholders, and experts beyond my own discipline were often secondary to the design process itself. During my final year of the program, I enrolled in an elective seminar course titled Urban Design & Development, or PLAN 640. The course required site visits, interactions with stakeholders and community members, and interactions with municipal experts. Most importantly, it required me to work across disciplines to address urban issues with strategies that centered community priorities. This experience, I later realized, was far more reflective of professional planning and design environments. In practice, planners and designers collaborate with professionals beyond their own disciplines frequently. My experience in PLAN 640 therefore raised a broader pedagogical question for me, which I explore in this thesis: **what role can non-studio based service-learning play in preparing students for professional practice?**¹

Service-learning has emerged as a key pedagogical strategy, especially within urban planning education. As I transitioned from design education to urban planning education, I became interested in how non-studio based service-learning shapes urban planning students' professional preparation. The problem that this thesis addresses is that service-learning is well studied in planning education, but non-studio based service-learning models remain underexamined. In particular, I examine how participation in a non-studio service-learning course develops planning students' sense of professional preparedness. This research addresses that question by drawing on evidence from students enrolled in the PLAN 640 course at Kansas State University. While the course enrolls students from multiple disciplines, this study focuses specifically on the implications of these experiences for planning education and the professional preparation of planning students.

Beyond my own experience with the PLAN 640 course, this study raises a broader pedagogical question within planning education. The structure of the course, which combines interdisciplinary learning with community-engaged project work, more closely resembles the professional environments that urban planners encounter in practice. Rather than developing individual proposals and presenting them to hypothetical users, students work in multi-disciplinary groups, as well as engage directly with community members, local organizations, stakeholders, developers, and professionals from multiple disciplines. This learning structure raises questions about how professional preparation is developed in planning education, and whether non-studio based service-learning can meaningfully contribute to practice preparation.

Over the past four decades, scholarship has consistently shown that service-learning improves students' long-term learning outcomes, preparing them for professional careers, especially within applied fields. Some of the most widely cited literature indicates that students develop critical thinking skills, a future commitment to activism, and deeper understandings of social justice challenges that real communities face as they transition to professional practice (Astin et al., 2000). The benefits of service-learning also include a stronger sense of civic responsibility and positive attitudinal outcomes, extending beyond purely educational impacts (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Markus et al., 1993).

Within the context of urban planning education, these benefits are particularly important to instill in planning students. Urban planning frequently involves large-scale projects and community-level development decisions. Examples include transportation planning, community development, environmental planning, urban design, and real estate development. In each of these fields, professionals make decisions that impact communities and their future development. Therefore, exposing students to educational formats that incorporate civic engagement is essential for preparing urban planners who can work across disciplines and engage effectively with communities. This thesis therefore examines how students experienced professional preparation in a non-studio service-learning course.

¹ Service-learning is a distinct educational model that differs from fieldwork or volunteer efforts within education. Service-learning refers to educational experience in which student work extends beyond the classroom, into the community. It is characterized by reciprocity in both learning and service to a particular community, where the service-learning project is the core of all coursework (Furco, 1996).

The Problem

While service-learning has been established as an effective tool for fostering empathy, critical thinking, and improved learning outcomes among students (Bringle et al., 2004; Cencula Olberding & Hacker, 2016; Salam et al., 2019), it is particularly important to examine these outcomes within urban planning education given the applied nature of the discipline. Urban planning and design education and professional practice are closely intertwined, with professional accreditation and academic accreditation often shaping one another. As a result, planning education serves as a foundation for professional practice, emphasizing the development of skills that students will apply directly in their careers (Salama, 2016). Additionally, social justice, equity, diversity, and democracy are central priorities in both the Diversity Task Force Report to the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) and the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB), implying that these values are reflected in both planning practice and education (Agyeman & Erickson, 2012; Sen et al., 2017).

Beyond conceptual understanding of communities and social justice implications of community-engaged work, students must also develop an operational understanding of planning roles in practice (Levkoe et al., 2020). Existing literature consistently identifies positive outcomes of service-learning educational models despite caveats in the structure of coursework and engagement (Levkoe et al., 2020; Lu & Lambright, 2010). Additionally, working within interdisciplinary groups equips students with the skills to handle more realistic professional scenarios (Lu & Lambright, 2010).

Beyond the pedagogical debates within service-learning literature, most literature pertaining to urban planning education privileges studio-based course formats. Prominent urban planning pedagogical literature has already highlighted the importance of community-engaged learning in design studios, but far less is known about how non-studio service-learning coursework affects students' learning outcomes, including professional preparedness (Forsyth et al., 1999, 2000; Hardin et al., 2006; Neuman, 2017; Roakes & Norris-Tirrell, 2000). Studio-based learning is often treated as the dominant or most effective format for community-engaged planning education (Forsyth et al., 2000). Therefore, this thesis asks: **What is the impact of non-studio based service-learning on professional preparedness of planning students?**

Recently, a shift toward studio-based planning education has occurred (Forsyth et al., 2000; Lang, 1983). Advocates of design studio integration into planning education argue that design studio models facilitate applied learning and simulate real-world project environments more effectively than lecture-based coursework (Higgins et al., 2009; Kamalipour & Peimani, 2022). However, service-learning frameworks are not limited to studio formats. Alternative models exist in planning pedagogy and across disciplines (Mitchell, 2008; Schlossberg et al., 2018). According to Salam et al. (2019), pedagogy related to service-learning corresponds to how frequently service-learning educational models are employed in a respective academic field. In the context of planning education, very little pedagogy critically examines the integration of service-learning and non-studio coursework. This thesis aims to address this issue, investigating how professional development of urban planners is shaped by non-studio based, interdisciplinary service-learning coursework.

To address this gap in planning pedagogy, this study examines students' reported learning outcomes through Dr. Susmita Rishi's Urban Design & Development (or PLAN 640) course at Kansas State University. This study focuses on a seven-year period from 2018-2024 during which this course was taught as part of the Master of Regional & Community Planning curriculum.² The course enrolls students from multiple disciplines who participate in a semester-long service-learning project. While

² In 2024, Kansas State University began offering a Bachelor of Real Estate and Community Development (RECD). RECD students are also required to enroll in PLAN 640.

it is housed in the planning curriculum, the course regularly includes students from Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and related fields, including students minoring in community planning.³ Class sessions include readings and discussions that familiarize students with foundational theory and movements in urban design and planning. In recent years, the course has also incorporated instruction on the principles of service-learning, brownfield redevelopment and the theoretical foundations of community-engaged coursework.

The importance of elucidating the differences between studio-based and non-studio based learning outcomes is twofold. First, it is important to note that Kansas State University’s Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional & Community Planning is housed within the College of Architecture, Planning & Design. However, urban planning departments are not always located within design schools, and across the field two general curricular models exist: studio-based and non-

Design Studio-Based Education	Non-Studio Based Education
• Education takes place typically in smaller class sizes. • In many cases, all students in a studio are from the same academic discipline. • Project-based learning where students work either individually or within groups on projects that span beyond those typically assigned in traditional courses. • Class sessions are typically focused on individual feedback.	• Education takes place in a traditional classroom environment; class size determined by enrollment cap. • Learning is conducted through lecture or discussions where instructor prepares or referees material and conversation. • Class sessions tend to be focused on the lecture or discussions in addition to readings and supplementary material.

Table 1: Studio-Based Versus Non-Studio Based Course Characteristics. Source: Author.

studio based programs. Therefore, assuming studio-based coursework design as a standard course modality does not reflect the diversity of planning programs.⁴ The benefits of these studio-based modalities are well-studied, yet less is known about these service-learning benefits as applied to non-studio based coursework. Additionally, KSU’s service-learning course, within a program housed in a design college, provides a useful case for examining how different course modalities operate in planning education. In addition to urban planning students, the PLAN 640 course integrates students from across the college and related programs, bringing interdisciplinary perspectives to the final project: an urban design visioning proposal.

Beyond examining non-studio coursework in planning education, this study also addresses limitations of service-learning identified in existing literature. One commonly cited limitation is the need for substantial faculty guidance to support student morale and project progress throughout the course (Conville & Kinnell, 2010; McKay & Estrella, 2008). Faculty capacity and course structure can significantly affect this support. The PLAN 640 course is a three-credit hour seminar course,

3 Majors represented in previous coursework include: Regional & Community Planning, Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Interior Architecture, Political Science, and Business Administration.

4 One example of this is the University of Kansas; the Master of Urban Planning (MUP) program is housed within the School of Public Affairs & Administration.

which differs from the design studio formats that service-learning literature has most frequently examined.⁵ Therefore, this study also accounts for how time constraints, faculty involvement, and project scope influence students' reported learning outcomes. While every student's experience in service-learning coursework is unique and dependent on factors such as group members and community partners, this research investigates particular impacts of this course on students related to professional development and relevant context. In surveys and interviews, students answered questions related to:

- Overall experience with service-learning coursework model
- Skill development
- Interdisciplinary teamwork
- Community engagement learning
- Brownfield learning
- Professional preparation
- (If applicable) Suggested course improvements

Although the course enrolls students from multiple disciplines, this thesis focuses primarily on the experiences of planning students. Urban planning as a professional field is inherently interdisciplinary, so this study focuses primarily on the experiences of planning students while also considering insights from students in other disciplines. Design students, for example, often encounter planning perspectives through collaboration with planning students in the course, providing additional insight into how interdisciplinary learning influences students' understanding of planning practice. These perspectives illuminate how this course format affects students' experiences outside of traditional studio environments.

I worked on this thesis as part of a larger research project—Brownfield Redevelopment and Critical Service Learning: Towards Better University-Community Partnerships—led by Dr. Susmita Rishi which examines the reciprocal impact of service-learning and university-community partnerships on students and communities. My contribution to this project focuses on students' learning outcomes and their relationship with professional development. Drawing on my experiences with service-learning coursework and design studio work as both an architecture and planning student, I became interested in understanding how non-studio based service-learning coursework prepares students to begin their careers in professional practice.

As a student preparing to enter the field of planning education, whose learning has largely been delivered through design studio formats, I became interested in using our broader dataset on student learning outcomes to understand how non-studio educational formats contribute to professional development. This research is one component of a larger project under Dr. Rishi and Dr. Shakil Kashem, in collaboration with Kansas State University's Technical Assistance to Brownfields (TAB). Overseen by KSU's Center for Hazardous Substance Research, TAB provides technical assistance to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Regions 5, 6, 7, and 8. This support assists communities with brownfield cleanup and revitalization efforts. TAB delivers this assistance through community engagement, consultations, educational campaigns, and more (KSU TAB, 2025⁶).

⁵ Urban Design & Development (PLAN 640) is an upper-level undergraduate seminar required for Master of Regional & Community Planning and Bachelor of Real Estate and Community Development students. It is available to take as an elective seminar for students in any other academic discipline at KSU.

⁶ KSU's Technical Assistance to Brownfields "About" page here: <https://www.ksutab.org/about-us>

As part of this outreach, KSU TAB provides funding for the PLAN 640 course, allowing students and faculty to travel to partner communities at least twice annually.

For this reason, I will shift between “I” and “we”. When I use “I”, I am referring to interviews, communications, or analysis conducted independently. I will also use “I” to frame some of my own experiences in the course that this study investigates, both as a former student, teaching assistant, and researcher. When I use “we”, I refer to interviews, discussions, or activities conducted jointly with Dr. Rishi. The research team refers to myself, Dr. Rishi, and Dr. Kashem collectively. Additionally, the following abbreviations are used frequently throughout the thesis: Kansas State University (KSU), KSU Technical Assistance to Brownfields (KSU TAB or TAB), and the course itself, Urban Design & Development (PLAN 640).

History of Service-Learning

The term “service-learning” was first formally used in 1967 by Robert Sigmon and William Ramsey at the Southern Regional Education Board. The term was used broadly to refer to learning through hands-on work extending beyond the classroom (Seitsinger, 2005; Sigmon, 1979). At the time, service-learning as an independent framework for education lacked both the theoretical underpinnings and rigorous definition of educational models that fit this new categorization (Giles & Eyler, 1994). The development of service-learning as an educational model prior to its being named in educational spheres can be traced back to John Dewey in the 1930s, whose research on “learning by doing” within higher education and its impact on community development influenced later scholars, such as David Kolb (Giles & Eyler, 1994; Salam et al., 2019).

David Kolb further extended Dewey’s investigation by developing a framework for “experiential learning”, arguing that learning is fundamentally about adapting to the real world, thus, educational institutions prepare students for independent careers while bridging conceptual and physical aspects of subject matter and facilitating transactions between students and their environments (Kolb, 2014). Overall, the argument in favor of experiential learning, later known as service-learning, makes the case for this type of learning model by connecting the purpose of education to real-world professional experience and community development.

Early critiques of service-learning largely involved critical assessments of experiential learning models proposed by prominent theoreticians such as Kolb. For example, Freedman & Stumpf (1980) directly critiqued Kolb’s learning model by arguing that validation of service-learning models and emerging insights were not rooted in empirical evidence. Another critique of Kolb’s learning model problematizes the observation of experience as evidence in favor of experiential learning (Miettinen, 2000). At the time of initial critiques, Kolb addressed concerns of experiential learning and the evidence in favor of its efficacy by explaining that consolidation of theory and implementation of applied learning in educational frameworks needed to progress before further empirical data could aggregate on the subject (Kolb, 1981).

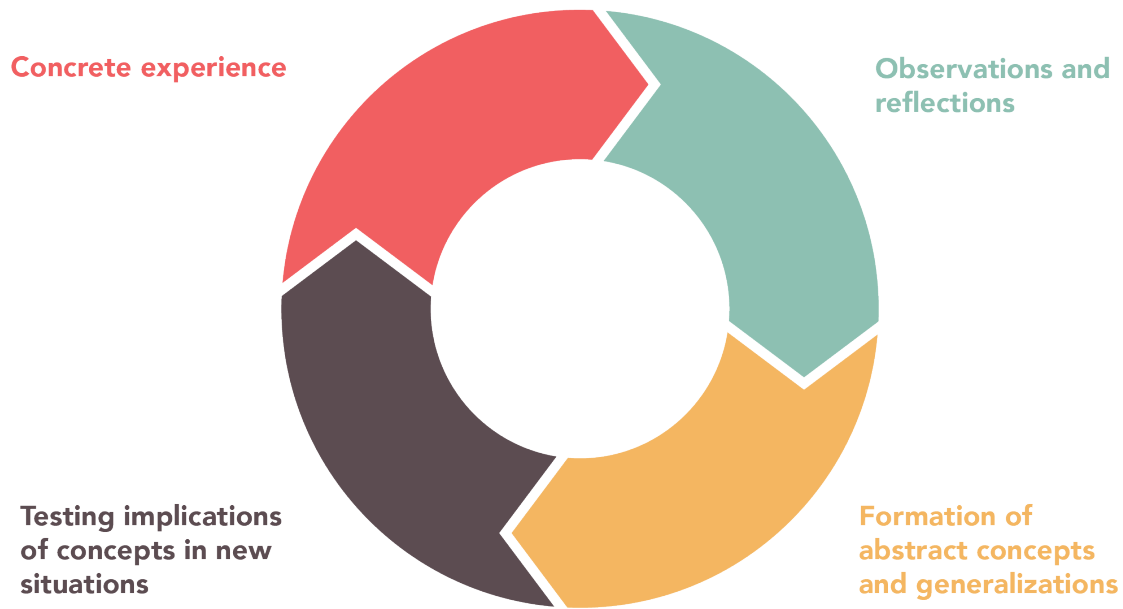


Figure 1: Kolb's Visualization of The Lewinian Model of Action Research and Laboratory Training. Adapted from Kolb, 2014.

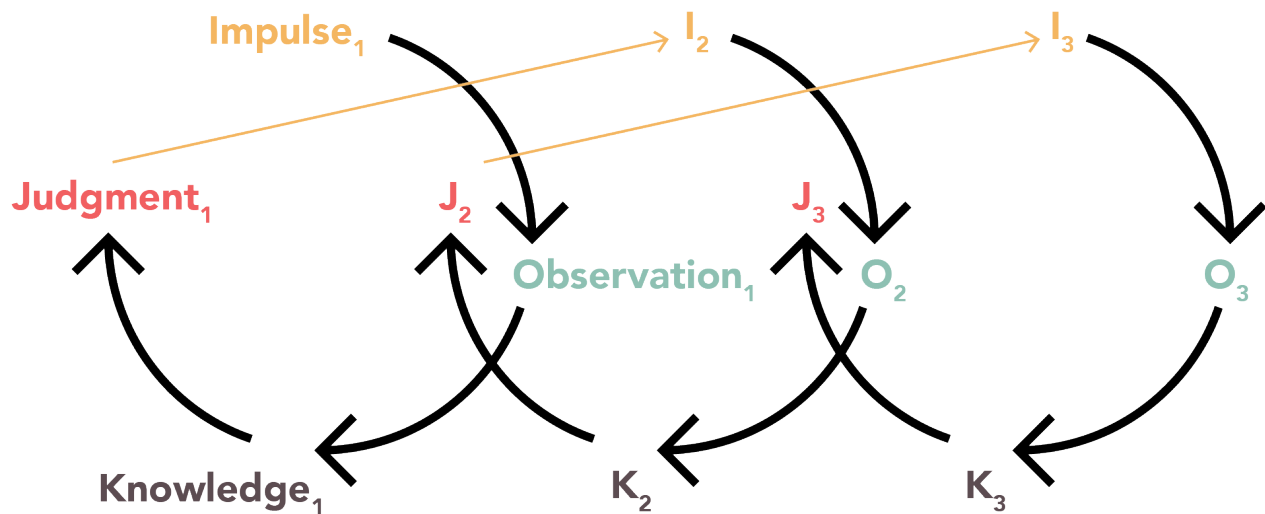


Figure 2: Kolb's Visualization of Dewey's Experiential Learning Model. Adapted from Kolb, 2014.

In the past few decades since those initial critiques and the call for further investigation on the matter, more and more studies have emerged that compile empirical evidence demonstrating the efficacy of service-learning (Fisher et al., 2017; Markus et al., 1993; Stukas et al., 1999; Weiler et al., 2013). Additionally, the number of institutions that have engaged in service-learning partnerships with universities has continued to grow, indicating that the service-learning model produces positive impacts and shifts the dialogue toward implementation of service-learning in relation to different disciplines (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996).

Within urban planning education, service-learning has emerged as a vital pedagogical strategy in preparing students for professional careers based on the community-oriented nature of the field. While critiques of service-learning are understood and acknowledged, urban planning scholars discuss the importance of continued refinement of such course models considering the observable value they bring to students' educational and professional journeys (Kotval, 2003). Furthermore, Levkoe et al. (2020) discuss the growing body of research on cognitive and professional development outcomes that service-learning yields, yet they argue there is a continuous need for further investigation in relation to urban planning. This thesis aims to provide such a contribution by interrogating the outcomes of planning students in relation to professional development.

Defining Service-Learning

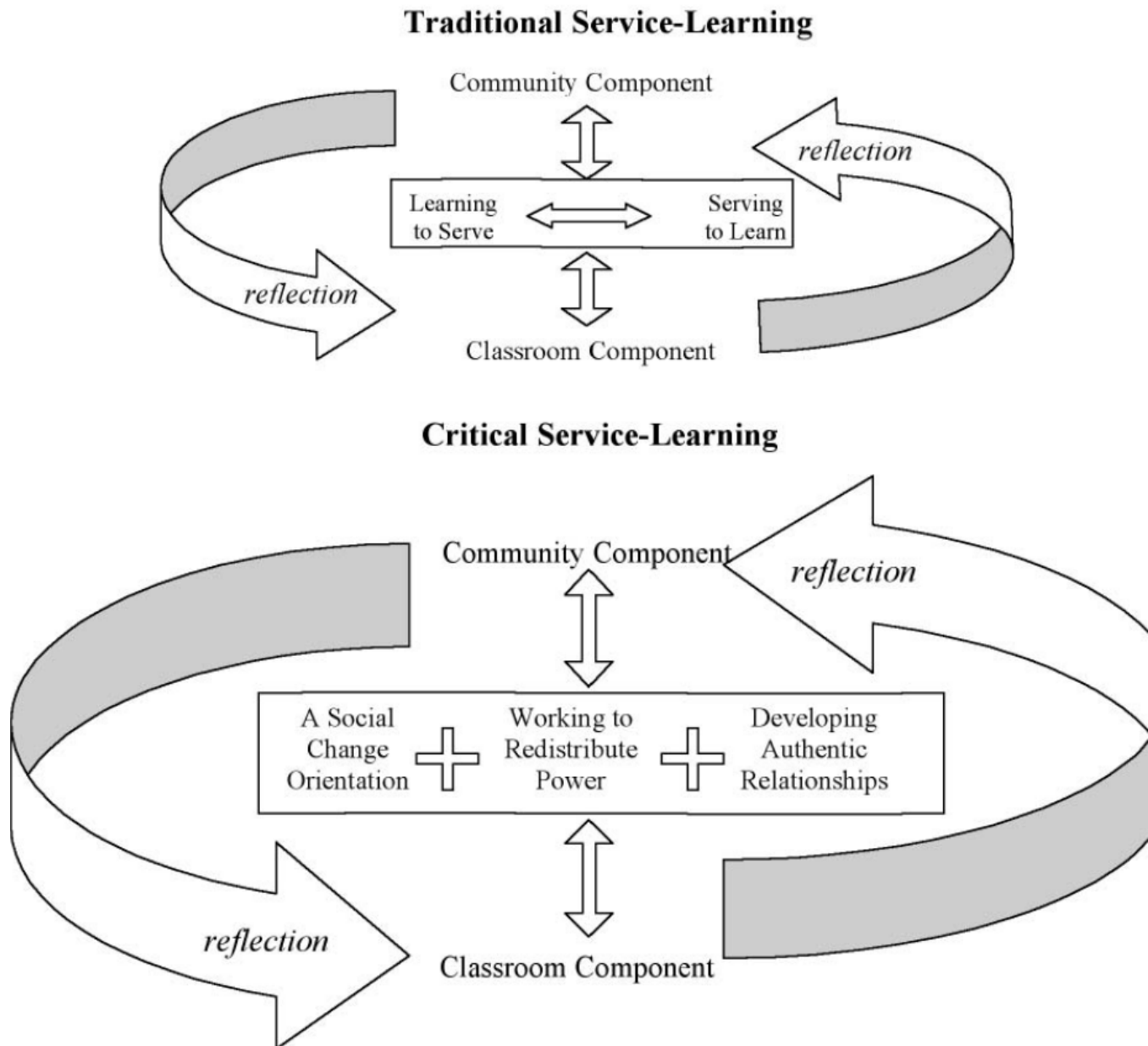


Figure 3: Traditional vs. Critical Service-Learning. From Mitchell, 2008.

Service-learning is an educational model that combines learning goals and community service

beyond single-occurrence volunteering to help students achieve academic goals while fulfilling a need within the community. According to Neururer & Rhoads (1998), community service-learning serves as a vehicle for connecting students and institutions to their communities and the larger social good, while at the same time instilling in students the values of community and social responsibility. Service-learning involves continuous interaction with a particular community, applied learning in both technical and cognitive skills, and student reflection. In more recent perspectives on service-learning, prominent authors argue that critical reflection is what distinguishes service-learning and facilitates more meaningful experiences for students. Mitchell (2008) states:

“The critical approach [to service learning] re-imagines the roles of community members, students, and faculty in the service-learning experience. The goal, ultimately, is to deconstruct systems of power so the need for service and the inequalities that create and sustain them are dismantled.”

The PLAN 640 course at Kansas State University draws on Mitchell's approach to service-learning, utilizing the lecture component and pedagogical structure to facilitate discussion amongst students, encouraging them to think critically about themes of social justice.

History & Structure of the Urban Design & Development Course

Dr. Rishi first began teaching the PLAN 640 course in the Fall 2018. Since then, students have worked with nine unique communities across three states, with a majority of the projects located in Kansas, but not limited to Kansas. Previous projects include projects in Beloit, Kansas, Marysville, Kansas, Norfolk, Nebraska, Des Moines, Iowa and Dunbar, Kansas City, Missouri. Since 2018, these projects have been developed through a partnership between Kansas State University's Technical Assistance for Brownfields (TAB) Program, the Departments of Landscape Architecture and Regional & Community Planning (LARCP), and participating community partners and non-profit institutions. KSU TAB is a U.S. EPA-funded technical assistance provider serving EPA regions 5,6,7, and 8, and is the largest such program in the country. Figure 4 shows the EPA regions serviced by KSU TAB in addition to PLAN 640 project locations. Figure 5 shows the collective timeline of the course and the projects undertaken throughout the years.

In the course, the primary learning mode prior to any engagement activities is seminar-based, with an emphasis on open discussion amongst students. Students are assigned readings that establish basic and advanced understanding of planning and relevant design theory. This way, non-planning students receive a foundation of urban planning and design theory, and urban planning students develop a deeper understanding of these topics, supported by an open dialogue. Students also take turns being the weekly discussion leader, where they are tasked with coming to class with a recap of the readings and prepared questions to discuss. Throughout the weeks leading up to the project kickoff, they are introduced to concepts relevant to the semester-long urban design project, preparing them to work in interdisciplinary teams to produce an urban design visioning proposal. In recent years, Dr. Rishi has adjusted the provided readings to directly include literature on service-learning and community engagement in education, facilitating in-class discussions surrounding ethical obligations and social justice dimensions of these topics.

Within the first few weeks of class, Dr. Rishi and Professor Blake Belanger, Professor of Landscape Architecture at KSU, jointly host a meeting to prepare students for an in-person site visit with community partners. The landscape architecture studio is a design studio-based course that operates in parallel with Dr. Rishi's course. Both Dr. Rishi and Prof. Belanger work with KSU TAB, receiving support to teach community-engaged service-learning coursework and exposing students to a real-world project that involves conversations with real individuals as opposed to theoretical

clients or users. The landscape architecture studio does not work with students in PLAN 640 instead, students work under Prof. Belanger to develop site-specific landscape architecture proposals. The only aspect of both the landscape studio section and PLAN 640 that is shared is the community partnership, selected community, and engagement activities. The collective meeting amongst both courses happens with every project, where the instructors provide a presentation that introduces students to the community, discussing their historic background, challenges it faces, goals for its future (if specified), and best practices for engagement in order to engage productively.⁷

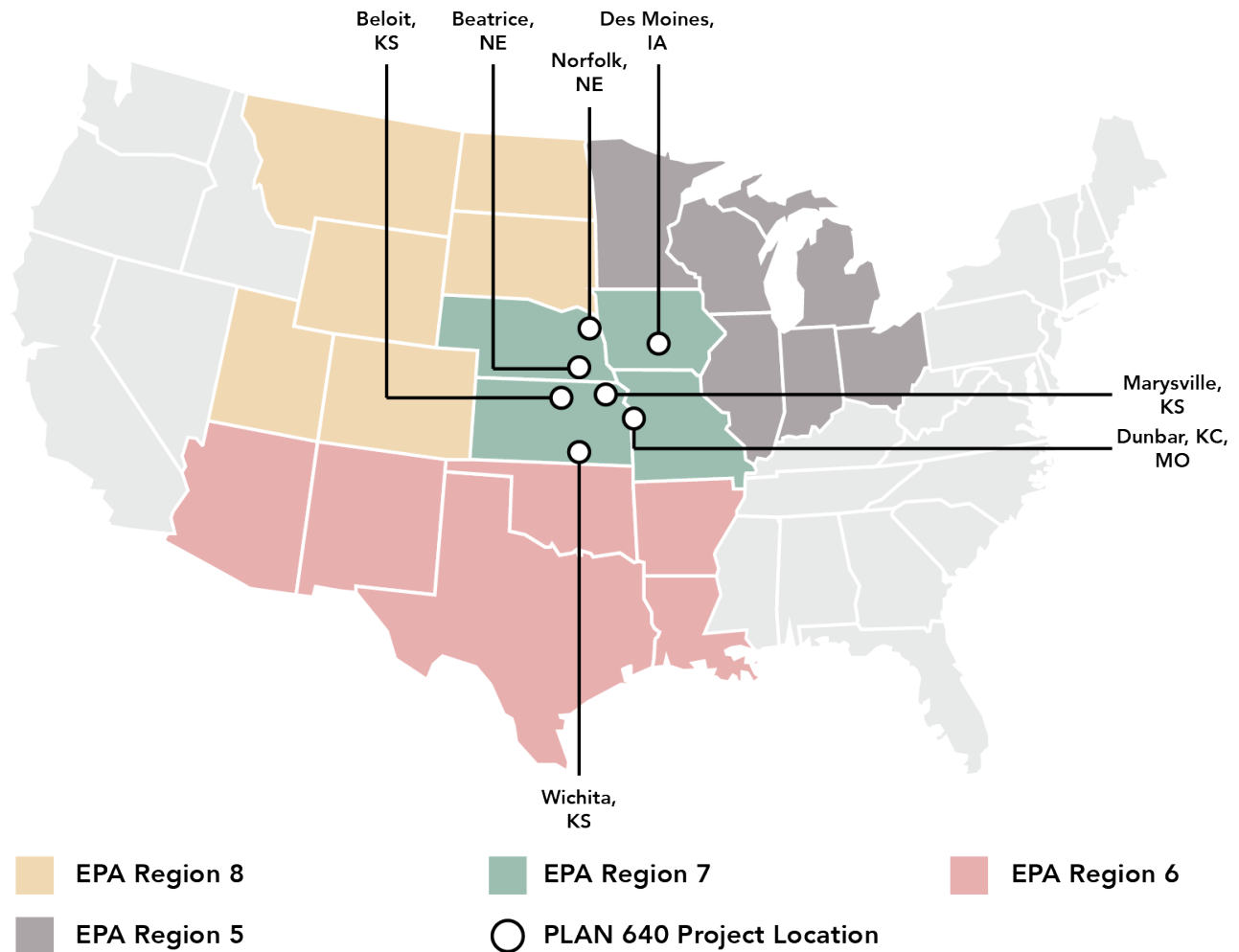


Figure 4: EPA Regions Served by KSU TAB and PLAN 640 Project Locations. Source: Author.

The course begins with the seminar component, where students are assigned weekly readings and come to class prepared to lead and participate in discussions. Shortly after the course begins, students are debriefed on the service-learning project and prepared for a site visit. On the initial site visit, students receive a tour of the community followed by presentations and round table sessions with community partners, often including residents, nonprofit organizations, stakeholders, and neighborhood associations. The roundtable discussions provide an opportunity for students to ask questions and engage in open dialogue to obtain perspectives and information that is applicable to their project development. Then, both the PLAN and LAR course sections come back together and develop a SWOT analysis of community context gleaned from the engagement activities. Upon their

⁷ Course instructors forge connections with community partners prior to the academic year, meeting with them to discuss goals, priorities, and project scope.

return to campus, students are assigned to project groups by Dr. Rishi.

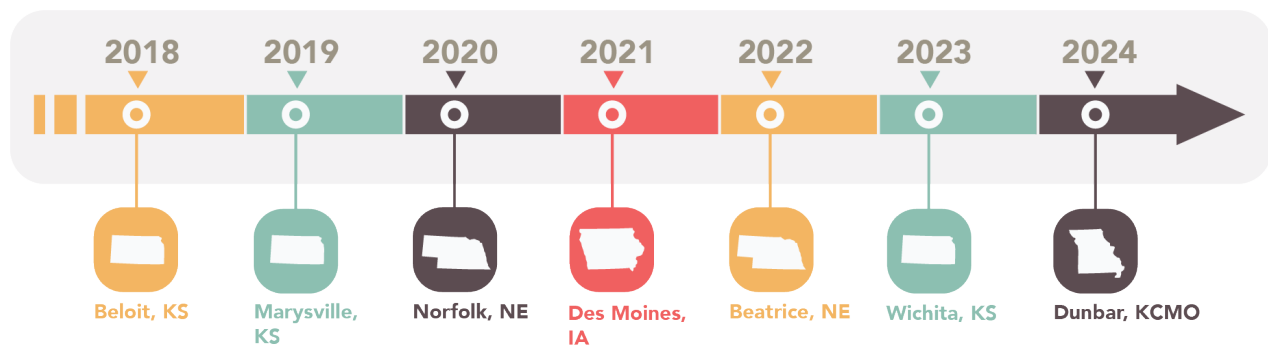


Figure 5: Timeline of PLAN 640 Course Iterations. Source: Author.

	Initiate		Plan		Realize	
	Inform residents and stakeholders of opportunities and potential change	Consult with community members to identify collective values and priorities	Produce & share a common understanding for redevelopment potential	Integrate stakeholder input specific to vision plans and design alternatives	Collaborate through active partnerships with clear missions	Nurture & Reinforce commitment to implementation
Intent	Communicate existing conditions, opportunities, constraints, and obstacles relating to a potential redevelopment.	Identify collective values through participatory practices.	Produce professional planning and design alternatives and share them with the public (typically with consultants).	Collect community feedback and revise planning and design proposals to reflect community input.	Establish active partnerships charged with specific tasks with emphasis on decision-making and resource-sharing.	Support the community in making final decisions and allocate resources for implementation.
Process	Through equitable outreach methods that will connect with all of those affected by the redevelopment.	Through equitable in-person and online community information collection & analysis aimed at understanding community values.	Through a partnership with experts and consultants, develop visionary plans and designs founded on community input.	Through appropriate and equitable feedback collection methods, ask locals for their insights about redevelopment alternatives.	Through engaged organizations and citizens dedicating to a specific task or dimension of the redevelopment.	Through collaboratively organized and communicated updates that showcase transparency.

PLAN 640 is situated within these two steps

Table 2: Community Engagement Outline. Adapted from Blake Belanger, 2025.



Figure 6: PLAN 640 Course Structure and Progression. Source: Author.

S	STRENGTHS	—	• Strong community sense of pride, history, identity, and culture • Armourdale is one of the most active neighborhood associations in all of Wyandotte • Lots of ethnic diversity within their Latino population • Geographically situated in the middle of the KC Metro, across from KCMO downtown • Major manufacturing and distribution hub generating economic activity across metro • Completion of levee resulting in lots of new development and ideation
W	WEAKNESSES	👎	• Consistent flood risk; even with levees, systems get overloaded • Lack of local medical services; no hospitals and very few pharmacies, dentists, etc. • Semi-truck speeds through all parts of the neighborhood • Children lack safe routes to school and spaces to play in despite popularity of sports • Condition of infrastructure; many bridges closed or railyards obstructing • Lack of public schools and public transportation
O	OPPORTUNITIES	💡	• Timing of major infrastructure projects; developers trying to complete before FIFA 2026 • Chiefs and Royals moving to the Kansas side, close to site • Land bank resources available for people to purchase • Stormwater management utilizing rain gardens and bioswales • Safe Routes to School qualifiers could introduce grant funding • Inclusionary zoning to provide amenities
T	THREATS	💣	• Restrictive covenants on land banks; not legally enforced but prohibitive • Major housing shortage and need for housing variety/affordability • East of 635, resident health is substantially worse due to hazardous substance exposure • West of Troost, life expectancy declines nearly 10 years between E. Troost of KCMO • All residential parts of Armourdale were historically redlined

Figure 7: Example SWOT Analysis from Previous Course Iteration. Source: Author.



Figure 8: Students on a Site Visit in Des Moines, 2021. Photograph by Dr. Susmita Rishi, used with permission.

Each group is intentionally composed of students from across the disciplines represented in the course that year, ensuring that the groups are multidisciplinary. Mid-semester, students present their urban design visioning proposal drafts to a curated group of stakeholders. This feedback session is usually held virtually and allows students to receive feedback from project partners in order to further develop their proposals. The project culminates in an open house presentation where community members, university partners, stakeholders, and other interested members of the public attend to listen to students' presentations and engage in further open discussion.



Figure 9: Students Working in Focus Groups in Des Moines, 2021. Photograph by Dr. Susmita Rishi, used with permission.



Figure 10: Students Presenting at the Open House in Dunbar, 2024. Photograph by Dr. Susmita Rishi, used with permission.

Prerequisite and Corequisite Coursework

The PLAN 640 course is designed to be a core curriculum component of the 5-year non-baccalaureate M.RCP degree program and more recently also of the BS in Real Estate and Community Development program. For students in these two majors, the course is completed in their third year of studies. Prior to enrolling in the course, students have completed multiple undergraduate prerequisites and core courses. The core coursework fulfilled prior to enrolling in PLAN 640 exposes students to community development skills, cartography, GIS software, ethics and environmental dilemmas in the field. By the time students are enrolled in this course, they have developed writing and public speaking skills, a broad understanding of planning concepts and theories, and intermediate technical competency in GIS tools for spatial analysis.

In the same semester that planning students enroll in PLAN 640, they are also required to enroll in PLAN 510, or Graphic Composition & Representation for Planning. In this course, students are introduced to graphic design and composition principles. Throughout the semester, they work on various assignments in Adobe Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign. In PLAN 510, students are assessed by graphic quality of images and visualizations, composition, and ability to complete different tasks using Adobe software. As the course progresses, students become more independent in their design process and begin to develop their own portfolio of work using the skills learned in the course. This course and co-requisite occur during the third year to prepare students for off-campus study options and upperclassmen internship opportunities in the following semester. Additionally, this component of the curriculum equips planning students with graphic design capabilities as they transition into graduate studies and coursework that demands stronger visualization skills.

Most importantly, PLAN 510 is a co-requisite of PLAN 640. The skills students learn in PLAN 510 are intended to be translated into the service-learning project and development of deliverables. Students spend the semester developing urban design deliverables to convey their group's vision for the partner community, and PLAN 510 equips them with the technical skills to create different imagery. Overall, the curriculum for the 5-year M.RCP degree is intentionally structured, so students enter the PLAN 640 course with an understanding of planning concepts and theoretical approaches. Then, they actively develop their graphic design and composition skills throughout the course project and the PLAN 510 assignments. Students can also use the PLAN 510 course sessions to seek

help and feedback on their materials for the service-learning project.

Taken together, PLAN 510 and PLAN 640 function as complementary components of the curriculum. PLAN 510 develops planning students' graphic composition and visualization skills, while PLAN 640 provides the interdisciplinary, community-engaged setting in which those skills are applied to a real project. In this sense, PLAN 510 supports students' technical preparation, and PLAN 640 serves as the site where that preparation is tested, extended, and made professionally meaningful through collaborative and public-facing work.

Additionally, design students enter the course with stronger technical capabilities pertaining to graphic design and visualization. This course is open to upperclassmen in design programs, so students have typically completed two years and four semesters of discipline-specific design studio. Therefore, design students enter the course with the skills needed to produce graphic deliverables. However, depending on each design student's elective coursework, they enter this course with varying knowledge of planning concepts and theory. Some students choose to participate in the Regional & Community Planning minor, meaning they have previously completed undergraduate elective coursework in planning. Other students enrolled in this course typically begin with no previous exposure to planning coursework. Similarly, for students outside of the College of Architecture, Planning & Design, students who choose to enroll in this course for elective credit may begin the semester with no exposure to planning concepts and little to no graphic design and composition competencies.

Study Methodology

This thesis research is part of a larger research effort led by Dr. Rishi to understand the impact of university-community partnerships. This research is funded by KSU TAB, which also provides technical assistance for communities seeking redevelopment and community revitalization. TAB supports student urban design visualization proposals as one aspect of this technical support. The greater research agenda of this project examines the impact of university-community partnerships, developing an understanding of both university-affiliated perspectives and community member and stakeholder perspectives. My thesis research focuses specifically on student learning outcomes as they apply to professional preparation for urban planning students. This component contributes to the university impact aspect of this broader research effort.

To better understand these student learning outcomes and answer my central research question, I employed a mixed-methods research design to examine student experiences and learning that prepared students for practice within a non-studio based urban design seminar. This mixed-methods research design was developed by drawing on foundational research principles as specified in Brent & Leedy's (1990) guidance on research tools, deductive logic, and effective communication through writing. I also drew on Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias' (2007) discussion of mixed-methods logic to guide the development of survey instruments, interview protocols, and the later synthesis of these data. This framework informed decisions regarding survey distribution, online data collection, and the use of Zoom to conduct and record interviews. The survey was used to gain a broader understanding of student experiences and learning outcomes in the PLAN 640 course, while semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask more specific questions about students' opinions on the non-studio based course model and how it pertained to professional preparedness.

I began this research by developing online survey questions to be distributed to former students in the PLAN 640 course (Appendix A). Next, I assembled a list of questions to guide semi-structured interviews (Appendix B). Dr. Rishi and Dr. Shakil Kashem helped me prepare both the survey and interview questions through multiple iterations. After the refinement of survey and interview

questions, we submitted and received approval for this research through Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board. Following the IRB approval, the research team began recruitment for survey distribution and interview invitations.

To recruit survey respondents and gauge interest in interviews, Dr. Rishi pulled course rosters from PLAN 640 from the 2018-2024 fall terms. Together, we worked to contact former students who were currently at KSU during the time of our data collection and former students that had graduated. We were not able to inquire about surveys or interviews to all former students given that students who graduated from KSU eventually lost access to their KSU emails. To address this, we reached out to former students through LinkedIn to ask if they were willing to participate in our survey and provide a current email address for survey distribution. Of 136 former students between 2018-2024, we were able to obtain email addresses for survey distribution for 79. The online survey, distributed via email using Qualtrics, received 62 unique responses, yielding a response rate of 78%.

The survey instrument consisted of three primary components designed to capture dimensions of professional preparedness. The first section asked respondents to provide background information on their academic programs, disciplinary backgrounds, disciplinary representation in project groups, and their prior experience with community engagement or service-learning coursework. The background information allowed me to examine responses based on discipline and project to see if any patterns emerged across those factors. The survey then included a series of Likert-scale questions organized into thematic categories aligned with the study's research questions, including perceived skill development, understanding of community engagement processes, professional identity formation, and perceived relevance of course content to future practice. The Likert-scale responses permitted me to see when respondents felt neutral or strongly about particular aspects of the PLAN 640 course and gauge attitudes regarding their experiences (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2007). The final section included open-ended questions inviting respondents to reflect on their experience with the course in ways that the survey could not fully encapsulate.

Analytically, the survey functioned as the broader pattern-setting component of the study. I used it to identify recurring tendencies across respondents, including overall course satisfaction, value of interdisciplinary learning, comprehension of key course concepts, and more. Additionally, the survey helped me understand where students felt less strongly about particular components of the course, which informed my approach to the interviews. The survey emphasized trends regarding broader themes, while the interviews were used to explain how and why these attitudes or reported outcomes developed. In each chapter, broader themes uncovered by the survey are expanded upon using data across interviews. The interview quotes provide substantial context and nuance to the survey results. Rather than functioning as independent observations, the survey results highlight consistent and broad patterns and interviews add depth to those observations.

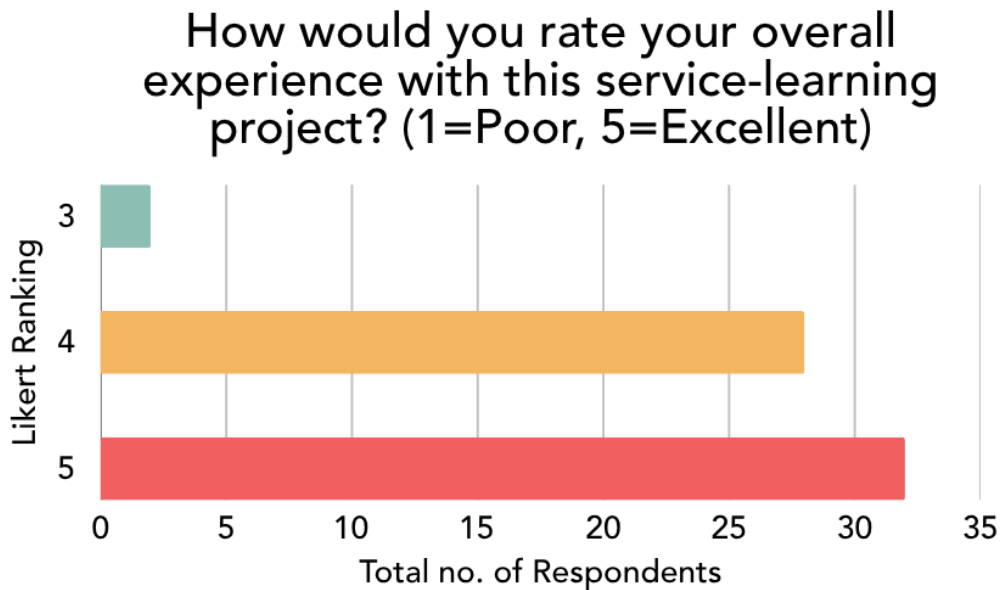


Figure 11: Overall Experiences with Service-Learning from Survey Results. Source: Author.

To explore students' experiences in greater depth, I conducted semi-structured interviews. I elected to incorporate semi-structured interviews to ask more specific questions about overall experiences and direct relation to professional preparation, especially given that interviewees came from various academic disciplines. Additionally, semi-structured interviews provided more depth to responses while maintaining consistency as I synthesized the data. Most importantly, the flexibility of the interview structure allowed me to ask questions about professional skill development and professional preparation both at the time of the class and in retrospect. I also asked follow-up questions to learn specifically how course experience applied to current professional experience.

To recruit interviewees, our Qualtrics survey included a question where respondents could indicate whether they were interested in participating in an interview or not. 44 survey respondents indicated that they were interested in interviews, and emails detailing the interview process and scheduling were sent to those that also provided an email for us to send the invitation to. After reaching out to schedule interviews, we completed a total of 21 interviews across 4 different academic backgrounds. We aimed to obtain at least one interview from every discipline previously enrolled in the course to understand consistencies across disciplines in students' course experiences. All interviews were conducted and recorded via Zoom, transcribed in Otter.ai and cleaned manually, and coded in Dedoose. While the interview protocol was developed collaboratively with the research team, I assumed the majority of the responsibility for conducting, recording, transcribing, and eventually coding the interviews.

Qualitative Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed prior to analysis. I manually reviewed and cleaned each transcript to correct transcription errors and ensure accuracy before coding. Then, I worked with Dr. Rishi to develop a codebook in Dedoose. I relied on Saldaña's (2011) qualitative data analysis guidelines to first develop parent codes that encompassed broader thematic categories consistent with service-learning and planning education literature. These initial parent codes were designed to summarize major concepts explored in both the interview protocol and initial survey findings, including professional skill development, interdisciplinary collaboration,

community engagement processes, and overall learning experience.

We worked collaboratively to iterate on the codebook, ensuring that codes were applicable across interviews and that child codes accurately captured nuance and specificity within interview discussions. Parent codes were used to categorize general topics of interview responses, while subsequent child codes captured more specific dimensions of interviewee experiences within those broader categories. As coding progressed, definitions of codes were refined and overlapping codes were consolidated to ensure consistency across transcripts.

After coding all interview transcripts, coded excerpts were reviewed to identify patterns and relationships between codes. Following Saldaña's (2011) guidance on pattern coding, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories that structure the findings presented in subsequent chapters. Additionally, I drew on Saldaña's (2011) guidance on analytic memos to capture nuance within coded responses that the codebook did not fully account for. For example, if multiple interviews referenced interdisciplinary learning either collaboratively or through navigating challenges, this difference was captured in a memo. These analytic memos helped document emerging interpretations and supported the development of broader themes across interviews.

Across interviews, later interviews largely reinforced themes that had already emerged during earlier stages of coding while providing additional examples from different disciplinary perspectives. While minor nuances continued to appear, few entirely new codes or themes were required in later transcripts, indicating that thematic saturation had been reached within the interview sample. Narrative themes were a principal data source for drawing conclusions about professional preparedness in students throughout this study.

Open-ended survey responses were reviewed alongside interview data to identify areas of convergence and divergence across data sources as part of a triangulation strategy. Survey respondents had the option to include additional comments about their PLAN 640 course experience that were not captured in the structured survey questions, providing a broad overview of students' overall attitudes toward the service-learning model. While survey responses highlighted general patterns in how students perceived the course and its relevance to professional preparation, interviews allowed participants to elaborate on these experiences through specific examples of challenges encountered and professional skills developed. Overall, themes and attitudes were largely consistent across both data sources, with interview data providing additional nuance that helped interpret the broader patterns observed in the survey responses.

This study received approval from Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and was determined to qualify for exempt status under applicable federal guidelines.⁸ All participants provided informed consent prior to participation in both the survey and interview components of the study. To protect participant confidentiality, survey data were collected through Qualtrics and were accessible only to members of the research team. Survey responses were exported for analysis and stored on a secure server maintained by the research team. Interview participants were assigned pseudonyms, and identifying information was removed from transcripts. Any names mentioned by interviewees during interviews were redacted to protect the identities of other individuals referenced during discussions.

Since this research was conducted within the same institution where participants had previously taken the PLAN 640 course, I considered potential power dynamics associated with my institutional role. Some participants knew me personally, some had previously been students for whom I served as a teaching assistant, and others were still enrolled at the university during the time of data

8 IRB approval was received with #IRB-12883.

collection. To mitigate any perceived pressure to participate, recruitment materials emphasized that participation was entirely voluntary and that non-participation would have no academic, professional, or personal consequences. Additionally, no participants were enrolled in a course for which I held a teaching assistant role at the time of data collection. In this way, I was able to reduce potential concerns related to authority and to ensure that participation was based entirely on informed, voluntary consent.

Participants were informed at the beginning of the survey and verbally before interview recordings that they could decline to answer any questions. They were also informed that they could contact myself or the research team at any time to ask any further questions or withdraw consent to use their responses at any time. Because participants could opt out of any questions, the number of total responses in some figures, charts, and tables throughout this thesis may differ.

Study Limitations

While the goal of this thesis is to better understand the professional preparation of planning students in non-studio based service-learning courses, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. These limitations do not invalidate the results of this study. Rather, they help define the scope of the analysis and the context in which the findings should be understood. As with many service-learning studies examining student learning outcomes, this research functions as a case study that provides context for future research in planning pedagogy.

Self-selection bias is a potential limitation of this study because participation in both the survey and interview component was voluntary. Students and alumni who chose to participate may have been more likely to hold strong positive or negative views toward this course and their experiences. As a result, the findings may reflect the perspectives of students who felt especially engaged with the course, or students who had particularly negative experiences. This limitation affects the representativeness of reported experiences rather than the value of those experiences themselves.

Recall bias is another potential limitation of this study because it relies on retrospective accounts from students who completed the course across multiple years. Participants may reinterpret their experience over time, influenced by subsequent educational or professional experiences, and perceived course impacts may evolve concurrently. However, retrospective reflection provides insight into course impacts that students retained over multiple years, helping me identify which course themes were exceptionally meaningful after students entered professional practice. As a result, this study examines the perceived long-term influence of the course rather than directly measuring the learning outcomes at the time of the course.

Another potential limitation of this study is variation across course iterations. The PLAN 640 course has evolved over time, with adjustments made to course readings, pedagogical framing, and project scope. Additionally, interdisciplinary team composition and community partnerships change year to year, which may impact student learning outcomes and reported experiences. The project structure is built in part around community context and priorities, meaning that some aspects of the findings reflect the specific structure and facilitation of individual projects rather than non-studio based service-learning itself. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted with caution when considering their generalizability to broader non-studio based service-learning.

Participant Profile

A total of 62 survey respondents provided background information, and 21 participants completed follow-up interviews. Table 3 summarizes the primary characteristics of survey and interview

participants.

Participant Profile		
Group	Characteristic	Largest Category
Survey Respondents (62 total)	Major:	Planning - 40%
	Project Representation:	Wichita (2023) - 27%
	Current Academic/Professional Status:	Working in a field related to major - 74%
Interview Participants (21 total)	Major:	Planning - 45%
	Project Representation:	Des Moines (2021) - 27%
	Current Academic/Professional Status:	Working in a field related to major - 62%

Table 3: Average Participant Profile. Source: Author.

My Positionality

I was an enthusiastic first-time researcher in planning. My pathway toward higher education was unconventional, as I am currently the first person in my family to obtain a college degree. As I progressed throughout my architecture education, I could not help but constantly reflect on the fact that many of my neighbors and community members from my hometown were statistically unlikely to obtain a college degree. Financial success is connected to higher education and degree attainment in the United States, which was an observation that informed my decision to pursue higher education in spite of the challenges I faced on that path (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016).

Mitchell's (2008) scholarship advocating for a critical approach to service-learning, encouraging students to delve into social justice and equity underpinnings of community conditions, spoke to me not only as a researcher but as a graduate student committed to educational access for all. Throughout my time in design studio coursework, I found the work to be fulfilling in terms of bolstering my creative and innovative approaches to solving dilemmas within the built environment. However, the studio environment often seemed insulated from the user groups for whom we were designing. While we visited the sites for our projects in many cases, the projects were typically speculative, and the visits were one-time occurrences. I found the studios in which we worked with community partners, such as Habitat for Humanity, to be rewarding, and I chose to pursue similar coursework throughout the remainder of my education.

When I took the PLAN 640 course as a graduate architecture student, I was pleasantly surprised by the community partnership aspect of the project. As students, we got to interact directly with a wide range of community partners and stakeholders. There was discussion surrounding social implications and community context regarding the surrounding neighborhoods of our proposal site, and I learned valuable lessons about the financial dimensions of design that were directly applicable to professional experience I pursued following the course. Additionally, I learned both from other academic disciplines and experienced reciprocity in working with my group. Even when my group experienced some turmoil when there were different expectations in our final project outcomes, navigating those differences proved to be valuable experience as I pursued further professional experiences.

Now, as a planning student, I am eager to understand whether these impacts are observed amongst planning students. I am familiar with both professional skills desired by designers and planners alike, so I would like to investigate whether those impacts are felt by other students. The process of collecting and synthesizing data has been interesting as I've grown to see the nuances that have emerged amongst students' reflections. While many of our interlocutors found some form of benefit from the service-learning experience, I am excited at the prospect of contributing toward urban planning pedagogy by examining what shaped their experiences and how it facilitated their professional development. By conducting this research, I hope to add a productive discussion of how service-learning can prepare students for professional practice while also analyzing challenges to be considered and potential room for improvement.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is organized into five chapters: Introduction & Background, Role Clarification & Professional Identity, Skill Development Through Interdisciplinary Learning, Meaningful/Impactful Work & Applied Learning, and Conclusions and Recommendations. The four chapters between the introduction and conclusion contain the majority of my findings, elaborating on the themes surfaced by the survey, supported by interview discussion and consistency with relevant bodies of literature.

In Chapter 2 - Role Clarification & Professional Identity, I discuss students' recollections of professional role understanding and the impact of interdisciplinary service-learning coursework on their professional identity formation. In Chapter 3 - Skill Development Through Interdisciplinary Learning, I expand on reflections of professional roles within project groups by analyzing themes across disciplines and deducing which skills were commonly derived from this course model. I also examine the role of interdisciplinary learning in the development of professional skills and how working with other disciplines shaped students' understanding of collaboration in practice.

In Chapter 4 - Meaningful/Impactful Work & Applied Learning, I delve into the connections between theory and practice. Because the course is focused on teaching urban planning pedagogy, the experience across disciplines is valuable information for understanding the efficacy of non-studio based planning education. I also describe students' reflections on meaningful moments throughout the service-learning process, how it contributed toward their professional development, and the impact of meaningful service-learning on students' understanding of ethical obligations in planning practice.

In Chapter 5 - Conclusions & Recommendations, I outline the higher-level deductions to be made from survey and interview data. I also examine the challenges that emerge from students' descriptions of their experience, following up with recommendations for future non-studio based coursework to provide a guideline for educators and researchers to continue seeking to further develop planning pedagogy rooted in non-studio based service-learning.

Chapter 02.

Role Clarification & Professional Identity

Role Clarification & Professional Identity

This chapter argues that non-studio based service-learning helps students clarify professional roles and, for some planning students, strengthens their sense of professional identity. I analyze survey and interview data to show that students across disciplines used this course to clarify their roles and responsibilities in professional contexts. For several students, this course was their first client-facing project in which they articulated their disciplinary scopes and negotiated distribution of professional responsibilities in collaborative environments. Rather than learning about planning and professional roles in the abstract, students were required to communicate disciplinary expertise, respond to community needs, and situate their work within a broader planning process. In some cases, interview participants described their experience in this course as a critical learning moment that shaped their long-term career interests.

Although this thesis centers the professional preparedness of planning students, I draw selectively on non-planning students' accounts in this chapter because the course itself is interdisciplinary. These perspectives from non-planning students are important context in understanding how role clarification and identity formation emerged. This is primarily because planning students recalled how interdisciplinary work was their first exposure to different roles, and the project structure required them to fulfill different roles beyond general planning knowledge and competencies based on the structure of their team. Additionally, the course also served as an educational experience for non-planning students as they learned what planning is and what planners do in practice. Therefore, perspectives from students beyond planning backgrounds are valuable in highlighting what specifically clarified professional roles and how students navigated responsibilities within groups.

Understanding professional roles is central to education in applied disciplines such as urban planning, as it is through these roles that theory becomes meaningful in practice. Olesen (2018) argues that professional role clarification is how planning students grasp theoretical foundations, and this chapter examines how the non-studio based format of PLAN 640 shaped students' ability to bridge theoretical concepts with practical applications. Interview findings affirm that the course linked theory, discussion, and project work in ways that helped students define possible professional pathways.

Professional role clarification is an essential skill for planners to learn throughout their education so they develop critical understanding of various actors in professional environments as they enter the professional sphere (Poxon, 2001). As planning education and practice rapidly evolve, educators must ensure that a broader understanding of interdisciplinary expertise and professional roles is reflective of practice (Campbell, 2014). In non-studio based educational contexts where students work across disciplines, this adaptability to various professional roles becomes especially important, as students must define and communicate their roles without the structured guidance typical of studio environments. This serves as both a rehearsal for professional practice and an opportunity to apply multiple theoretical approaches to real-world contexts, helping students identify their professional strengths and capabilities.

Therefore, this chapter examines how the course's non-studio format, discussion-based learning, and service-learning project shaped students' understanding of professional roles and, for some, their developing professional identities.

Across interviews, several related codes-such as role clarification, interdisciplinary collaboration, and professional identity-recurred across participants' reflections. Together, these codes showed that students used the course to better understand both their own roles and those of other disciplines. Students frequently described moments where they assumed specific roles, negotiated

responsibilities, or identified a particular “niche” within the project, often connecting these experiences to the development of skills that shaped their contributions. A related theme involved understanding other disciplines in practice, where students reflected on how the project exposed them to different disciplinary perspectives and scopes of expertise in collaborative, professional contexts. In some cases, this exposure contributed to students’ interest in particular aspects of other disciplines and influenced their developing professional interests. Survey responses reinforce this pattern, with a majority of respondents indicating that the multi-disciplinary nature of the project helped them better understand different perspectives on brownfield redevelopment (Figure 12).⁹ This survey pattern is important because it suggests that students broadly experienced interdisciplinary collaboration as a substantive part of their learning rather than as a secondary feature of the course. In other words, the survey indicates that students did not simply work alongside other disciplines; many understood that collaboration itself as part of how they learned about planning problems and professional roles.

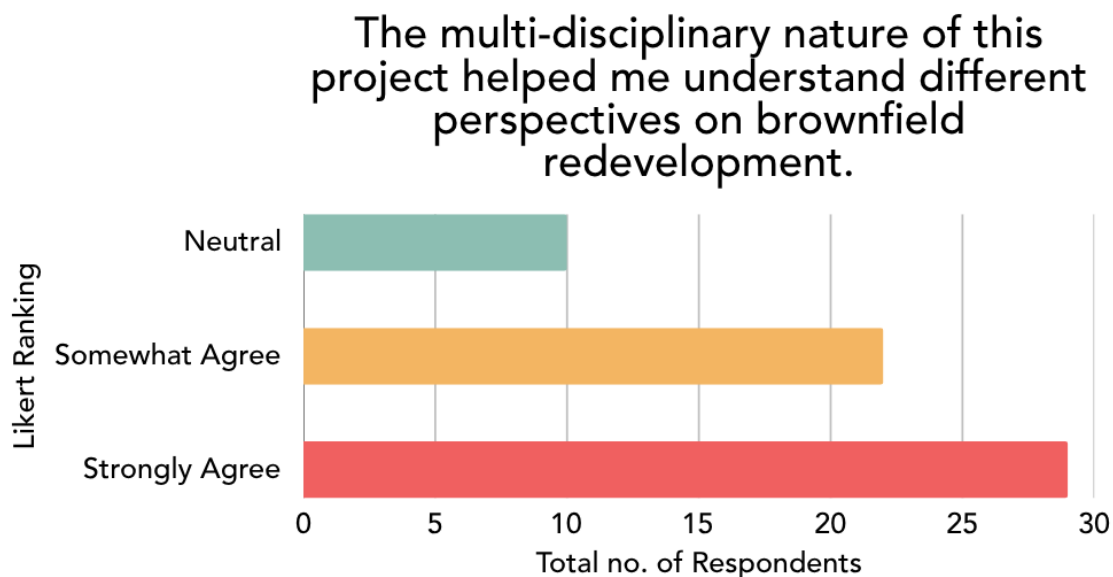


Figure 12: Survey Likert Rankings of Multidisciplinary Learning. Source: Author.

This chapter builds on the survey findings by analyzing how interviewees described professional role clarification and identity development. Drawing on patterns that emerged through iterative coding of interviews, I argue that non-studio based service-learning helped students clarify professional roles and, for some planning students, supported the development of professional identity. I examine how students described their roles within interdisciplinary, client-facing, and community-engaged contexts, and how these experiences bolstered their understanding of professional responsibilities as they transitioned into practice or continued their education.

Professional Role Clarification Amongst Planning Students

Planning students in this course used the project to move beyond simplified understandings of planning as primarily policymaking or decision-making, instead developing a more nuanced view of the multiple roles planners occupy in practice. Gunton (1984) argued that narrow definitions

⁹ This project is a partnership with TAB, so course concepts and challenges that students must learn about and integrate into proposals focuses on brownfield revitalization. This is a core component of PLAN 640 projects.

of planning overlook the profession's multiple roles, including public service, advocacy, and social learning. These distinctions help frame some of the roles that students in the PLAN 640 course gained exposure to or developed interests in. His framework broadly summarizes typical planning roles as:

- Technocrats
- Public servants
- Referees
- Advocates
- Bureaucrats
- State agents
- Social learners
- Social reformers

Gunton's assessment helps explain the wide range of roles a planner may occupy in professional environments. Contemporary planning literature similarly emphasizes the range of planning work, spanning governance, public service, nonprofit work, and urban design (Levy et al., 2009). This distinction was observed across interviews, where many interviewees said the course broadened or affirmed their understanding of what planners do, particularly by revealing roles that extend beyond policymaking into coordination, facilitation, and community engagement. Students described planners as working across disciplines, translating policy and stakeholder considerations to public audiences, and responding to community needs instead of relying on technical skillsets or specific types of planning. This shift in understanding provides a basis for examining how students clarified their own roles within the project.

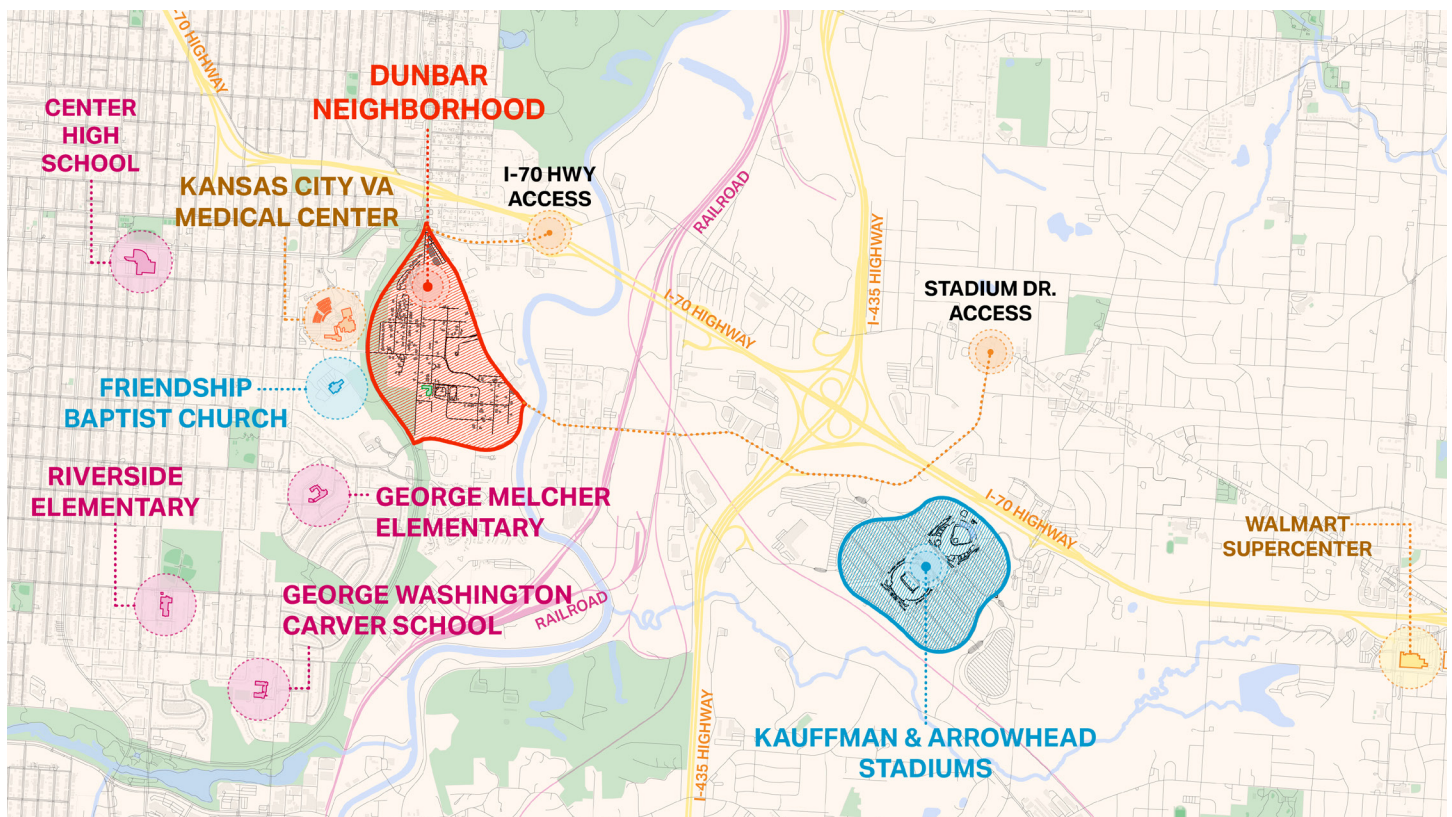


Figure 13: Sample Context Map. Source: Author.

Interviews revealed that, amongst planning students, role clarification did not emerge as a discovery of entirely new roles, but rather as refinement and articulation of previously abstract understandings of professional roles. Many students entered the course with some exposure to planning practice, but the course gave them their first sustained opportunity to test and explain planning's scope in an interdisciplinary setting.

One example of this was the Fall 2023 term, where students worked with the Heart of the City Neighborhood Association in Kansas City: specifically, within the Leeds-Dunbar neighborhood. The project required students to support community-led redevelopment efforts by engaging with local residents, municipal actors, and private stakeholders. This context placed students in interdisciplinary, community-accountable roles that extended beyond prior classroom or internship experiences. Dunbar's conditions were shaped by historical marginalization. This project required students to develop a robust understanding of community context and social factors influencing development in the neighborhood, requiring them to navigate complex challenges across disciplinary boundaries and delegate very particular responsibilities to ensure alignment with community priorities.¹⁰ This chapter examines how project participation pushed students to take on roles and responsibilities across disciplinary boundaries in community-facing projects such as Dunbar.

Planning Students Articulating Professional Roles in Interdisciplinary Teams

Throughout this project in PLAN 640, students worked with neighborhood leaders, residents, nonprofit actors, local firms, and public agencies, which exposed them to the range of stakeholders involved in planning practice. This wide range of interactions revealed the complexity of planning work and made professional roles more visible, particularly as students navigated different expectations across sectors. Kayla R., a planning student, described how this experience expanded her understanding of planning practice beyond her prior exposure:

"I knew what public sector planning looks like because my first internship prior to this class had been with a city, so I understood what I would be walking into and a professional career if I had gone the public route, but I didn't fully know what it looks like to work in the private sector of planning.

I feel like this class kind of gave me a taste of what that was like, because we were doing a design [where] we have a client. They had [specific] outcomes they wanted. We had to think about things like, can we apply for grants?

And what kind of feedback is the client going to give us? All of those aspects were new things to consider, and I felt like that gave me a better understanding of what that side of planning probably looks like." -Kayla R., Planning Student.¹¹

When she participated in the PLAN 640 course, Kayla was a third-year student in the non-baccalaureate program transitioning into graduate coursework, and the course gave her an early opportunity to work across disciplines and apply planning knowledge in a collaborative setting. Kayla's reflection shows that the course expanded her understanding of planning beyond the public

10 Banks, J. M. (2025, February 28). Once a vibrant neighborhood, residents want KC's Black mecca brought back to life. *Kansas City Star*. <https://www.kansascity.com/news/article296330059.html>. This is a local news article in the *Kansas City Star* reporting on the PLAN 640 class student projects and the Dunbar neighborhood context.

11 Kayla R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 17 July 2026.

sector and introduced her to the client-oriented and strategic dimensions of private-sector practice. Additionally, the project expanded her understanding of public-sector considerations by exposing her to the realities of grant writing and working with public technical assistance groups like TAB.

Kayla also described how working in an interdisciplinary team required her not only to contribute planning knowledge, but to explain what planning entails to peers from other disciplines. As she recalled her experience working with her group members, she clarified that this project was her first true group project in which she had to work collaboratively rather than individually. She noted that while her contributions were valued, they were not always fully understood:

“Anytime that I added something that was from a planning perspective, I think [my group members] definitely were like, ‘Oh, that’s great to know’. However, there were multiple times where I was asked to explain or describe what it is that I do...or describe something about urban planning or about community development, because a lot of people...didn’t have that prior exposure to it.

I know that there was one person in our group who hadn’t really taken a class that was related to planning before, and so I think that to some extent, most of them, half our group, didn’t really know what I did. One of my group members has a lot of classes with me, so they kind of got it. But I definitely think that everything I said was valued. So, that was nice to know that what I was saying actually impacted what we were doing.”-Kayla R., Planning Student.¹²

Kayla’s reflection highlights a key finding of this chapter: interdisciplinary teamwork required planning students not only to contribute their expertise, but also to explain what planning contributes. I found that this theme-planning students feeling as though their skillsets were valued in their project groups albeit not fully understood-was consistent across interviewees. The explicit distinction that Kayla draws between being valued and understood as the planner in the group suggests that role clarification occurred not only internally, but through communication with other disciplines. In this way, planning students developed a stronger understanding of professional roles through explaining them to others, making their disciplinary scope more explicit in real-world project scenarios.

Furthermore, other students expanded on Kayla’s experience of familiarizing other students with the roles and responsibilities of a planner. For others, the course helped make planning’s distinctive professional role more legible in relation to other disciplines. For example, Grant, who now works in city planning, connected the course to his later understanding of planning as a profession that coordinates expertise across disciplines. In his interview, Grant expanded on his project in Des Moines, Iowa, which took place in Fall 2021. “This means we’re getting old, Avery,” he joked as he clarified the particular year he participated in PLAN 640. He explained that the project involved a deeper understanding of brownfield redevelopment. As a planning student, Grant had some familiarity with these urban challenges, but articulating his knowledge and the role that planners play in community revitalization was the most beneficial in shaping his learning. He recalled that, at the beginning of the project, the scope of his role felt unclear when confronted with the complexity of the site:

“Oh, this whole time [prior to the site visit] I have been observing, I have been researching, I have been thinking, but [initially]...standing there, cars are going 60 miles an hour, it’s very overwhelming to think, ‘What is my role? How am I ever going to

12 Kayla R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 17 July 2026.

propose real change or make a difference?”-Grant R., City Planning Professional.¹³

Grant's initial uncertainty demonstrates a moment where planning roles were not yet clearly defined in practice, even amongst students that had broader ideas of professional responsibilities. However, Grant's later reflections show how this ambiguity shifted as he worked within an interdisciplinary team. He described how other students initially did not fully understand what planners do, but came to better recognize planning's role through collaboration:

"I think that was one of the first opportunities for a lot of people to understand exactly what it is that planners do. We had a really strong class. I think there were nine of us in my planning class, and everybody but two had done a first year studio.¹⁴ [The design students] did not have a great perception of the work that we do, the analysis and the level at which we are thinking. Planners really contextualize development. Architects [have] a wonderful impact on a building and a lot of architecture, as you see in the real world.

Architects do a lot of these planning-related skills themselves, or firms have hired planners or researchers to do a lot of the work we were doing. But at [that course] level, it wasn't that way. We really had to rely on each other, and the skills that we as planners have been learning we were able to exercise and showcase, and I think by the end, most of the students had a better appreciation for what exactly it is planners do."

-Grant R.¹⁵

Similar to Kayla, Grant explained that his understanding of professional roles was developed not just individually, but across disciplines through communication and collaborative work with other students. In retrospect, Grant talked about how he understood the difference between professional skillsets but did not yet possess the skills to take on the planning work individually. His reflection demonstrates that non-studio based project work functioned as an adaptable environment where students crossed disciplinary lines to accomplish particular goals in their projects. Most clearly, Grant framed planning as a profession that facilitates and coordinates expertise across disciplines, positioning planners as central to collaborative decision-making:

"...now that I'm a professional, planners are the facilitators between a bunch of different experts in different fields. So, architects have great skill at what they do, designing buildings, designing spaces. I mean, it's hard to limit an architect's scope... they are designing spaces, and engineers are making sure things are structurally sound, and aren't going to hurt somebody.

You have all these entities who are truly experts and have reasoning and justification for what it is that they do, and we as planners help to facilitate those and bring those together. A lot of my work is spent gathering information from an architect, an engineer, a developer who's...business savvy, and bringing that all together and putting it into a cohesive package to deliver to somebody to make a decision.

That was tied directly to the work we were doing in Des Moines. We were bundling it

13 Grant R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 September 2025.

14 First-year students in the College of Architecture, Planning & Design can take a one-year Environmental Design Studio (ENVD) to decide which academic program they would like to enroll in. Grant is referencing the ENVD program, explaining that majority of his cohort had participated in the program and gained a foundation in design skills and technical work.

15 Grant R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 September 2025.

all up, presenting it to the city stakeholders and we're making a pitch, basically. And the planners had a massive role in that." -Grant R.¹⁶

Grant's experience highlights a key finding of this chapter: the course helped planning students not only understand their own roles, but demonstrate what planning contributes in interdisciplinary contexts. His description of planners as facilitators and coordinators suggests that role clarification emerged through collaboration, as students translated their disciplinary knowledge for others and integrated multiple forms of expertise into a cohesive project. Rather than discovering entirely new roles, students refined their understanding of planning by practicing how those roles operate within real-world, team-based settings.

Testing Different Planning Roles

While Grant's account emphasizes how interdisciplinary collaboration made planning roles more visible and legible to others, other students described a different but related outcome. For example, Bryan R.'s reflection complicates the chapter's argument by showing that the course clarified planning roles even when it did not shape a lasting professional identity in community planning. His experience highlights how the course clarified the scope of planning work even when it did not lead to a lasting professional identity in a specific planning subfield. Bryan, now a transportation planner working at a private consulting firm, also participated in the Des Moines project (Fall 2021) and discussed how the course allowed him to test different planning roles within a collaborative setting:

"Definitely...I don't want to take credit for our team, it was all four of us, and everybody put in 25% percent, but I think that being the planner in the group, it piqued my interest in terms of looking at projects in a planning way, but [it] also being opened up to other ideas and other visions, which grew my ability to plan in different ways.

I will say, though, community planning, while this was a fun project, I just don't think that I loved it enough, and I was still open to other realms of planning after this class where I wasn't just stuck on this one. I think I took one or two more community planning related classes."-Bryan R., Transportation Planner.¹⁷

Unlike other students who attribute their experience to the formation of a distinct professional identity, Bryan did not describe the course as shaping a lasting professional role. Instead, the course helped him grow his professional knowledge as he tried out different planning roles without committing to a specific path. In this case, role clarification occurred through experimentation as Bryan evaluated different aspects of planning and how certain roles aligned with his interests.

Bryan's experience adds an interesting dimension to the conversation surrounding service-learning benefits. Currently, planning education literature often assumes professional role clarification as an outcome of service-learning, but rarely examines it directly (Howe, 1980). Interview findings from students who completed PLAN 640 suggest that the course supported professional role clarification and identity formation. This indicates that non-studio based service-learning is capable of providing these professional development experiences to participants. While role clarification did not always occur through validation of interests, stories like Bryan's demonstrate how real-world, client-facing projects give students the opportunity to test different roles in interdisciplinary project work. Across interviews, evidence suggests that role clarification extended beyond planning students themselves and helped students in other disciplines better understand what planners do in practice.

16 Grant R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 September 2025.

17 Bryan R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 19 September 2025.

Professional Role Clarification Among Non-Planning Students

Interviews with non-planning students suggest that PLAN 640 helped students from other disciplines develop a clearer understanding of what planners do in practice. This pattern was especially visible in interviews with architecture students, who described planning as more strategic, research-oriented, and design-relevant than they had previously assumed. One example of this is Sara T.'s recollection of how she encountered planning students in interdisciplinary group work. Initially, Sara was uncertain about the types of roles and responsibilities that planning students would take on based on her preconceived notions of planning in practice. She described how her understanding of planning roles and responsibilities shifted over the course of the project:

"I think a lot of my previous ideas of what planners did was a lot of...sitting in city offices and writing city ordinances and zoning, and not necessarily...the design side. Planning for developments that had a larger impact...wasn't just straight paperwork. And so, that helped me to realize that a lot." Sara T., Architectural Design Professional.¹⁸

Sara also described how planning students contributed differently to the project, particularly in structuring research and framing development proposals:

"...the planning students, they just had a better idea overall of how to set up a research project like that, rather than a design based one." -Sara T.¹⁹

Sara's account shows that working alongside planning students made planning's role and scope of responsibilities more visible by demonstrating how planners integrate research, strategy, and design into one comprehensive project. Another architecture student, Sawyer P., provides his account of interdisciplinary group work, describing how it also expanded his perspective on what planners do in practical settings. He explicitly named the ability of planners to understand context and programmatic elements in the group project, contributing skills that extended beyond his own disciplinary scope as an architecture student:

"I think our planning student did a good job of proposing program. I mean, it's one thing in studio to be given a site and a brief that gives you all the specific program you'll need. It's another thing to have essentially a completely blank slate and propose program entirely from scratch.

I think our planning student did a good job of exploring what could go in each of those [spaces] beyond how architecture students make the things look nice for the presentation. Not that we didn't propose programmatic elements, but I think having that kind of fresh vision helped." -Sawyer P., Architectural Design Professional.²⁰

Although Sawyer was not entirely clear on a planner's scope of responsibility at the beginning of the project, he retrospectively compared the differences between planners and designers, and the skillset that each discipline brought to collaborative projects.

Majority of prominent literature advocating for service-learning implementation in planning and design education follows a studio model, arguing that professional skill development and comprehension flourishes in studio-based learning environments (Forsyth et al., 1999, 2000; Roakes & Norris-Tirrell, 2000). While these studies contribute valuable empirical evidence for the

18 Sara T. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

19 Sara T. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

20 Sawyer P. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 14 July 2025.

efficacy of service-learning in planning and design education, interviews in this studio coupled with survey themes suggest that non-studio based formats can also achieve this type of professional development. Additionally, standard design studio coursework at Kansas State University tends to be homogeneous in disciplinary enrollment. While there are exceptions to this, PLAN 640 provides design students with the opportunity to engage in service-learning that integrates interdisciplinary teamwork. This experience, as indicated by interviews with design students, helped participants understand planning on a deeper level.

In studio-based education, roles are often structured through discipline-specific skillsets in relation to course projects. In contrast, the non-studio based format of PLAN 640 is quite flexible, permitting students to negotiate and articulate their own expertise and preferred roles in real-world situations. In some cases, such as Bryan's, students were able to experiment with different roles, crossing disciplinary boundaries to expand their knowledge of practice hierarchies. In many cases, as discussed by Sara and Sawyer, for example, planning roles became more explicit through either communication or facilitation in group work.

Varied Pathways of Professional Identity Development

As I conducted interviews, another nuance in professional role clarification emerged. While the previous sections demonstrate how the course clarified professional roles, interviewees also described how these experiences shaped their developing professional identities in different ways. Planning education literature often assumes that service-learning contributes to professional identity development, but this process is not always examined directly, particularly within urban planning (Beck et al., 2015; Gallop et al., 2023). These findings across interviews suggest that professional identity development in PLAN 640 did not follow a single linear trajectory but instead emerged through multiple pathways. I identified three mechanisms through which this happened: ambiguity, affirmation, and intentionality.

A planning student, Brianna S., describes ambiguity in her project experience. In retrospect, Brianna recalls her uncertainty about what her role in the project was supposed to be. However, she also explained that an initial degree of ambiguity was something that she had learned to embrace as she transitioned to professional practice:

"Yeah, I think [planning] is valued, but I don't know if [your group members] understand what you do. But to be fair, I don't know if at that point you also understand what planners do as a planner. I think it's really hard to find your way as a planner and what you actually want to do. Like, even now, I'm in transportation planning and I still have no clue what I'm doing." -Brianna S., Planning Professional.²¹

Brianna's account illustrates how professional identity development can involve uncertainty rather than immediate clarity. Although she described initial ambiguity in defining her role, she also identified specific strengths that emerged through the project, particularly in visual communication and research-based problem solving. She discussed how the role she fell into as a planner and graphic designer remained continuous throughout her professional career to date. When I asked her to elaborate, she talked about how the PLAN 640 course had facilitated this identity formation:

"Yeah, I think that class made me realize that the thing I brought to my group was graphics and that's something that really set me apart when I was looking for a job and in my job now. Also, being able to...have research-based solutions is extremely

21 Brianna S. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 28 August 2025.

important for every discipline, but especially planning.” -Brianna S.²²

In this case, ambiguity did not hinder professional identity development but instead contributed to it. By taking on new challenges in unfamiliar project work, Brianna began to recognize the specific skills she brought to interdisciplinary work. She learned that skills from other disciplines could serve as valuable knowledge in professional contexts.

A second pathway of professional identity development emerged through affirmation of an existing professional trajectory. Anna E., a planning student, explicitly stated that she was interested in community-accountable, engaged learning prior to her participation in PLAN 640.

Avery: We can start talking a little bit about...your overall experience with the project. How would you rate your experience with the service-learning project?

Anna: I would say excellent. It was probably the most reassuring course I took in college that solidified that I was on the right path, that I was going to like what I was doing, because...for so long in your first and second years...it's just an onslaught, so it doesn't give you the specifics of what a project could look like from start to finish, and how planners engage with the public, and how that influences our decision making. Whereas when you're writing papers, you just learn that criteria for that short amount of time. Sometimes some of it sticks, the rest of it just flies out. I think that class was the one that had the most impact in solidifying that I was where I was supposed to be and making the right life choices.²³

Anna's experience, she explained, was grounded in confirmation rather than exploration or navigating ambiguity. She had developed an idea of professional roles that she was interested in, and the PLAN 640 course gave her the opportunity to affirm these interests. In particular, she developed a deeper understanding of how planners engage a community and translate community priorities to higher-level planning decisions.

A third pathway involved intentionality in how students approached their education and career interests. For example, Kayla described how the course influenced her educational and professional interests moving forward. She discussed seeking out more client-facing, community-accountable projects based on her experience in PLAN 640:

Avery Neer: Did the course change your interest in working on community-based projects?

Kayla: I want to do them more. I think that it increased...now, when I'm looking at what classes I want to enroll in, I'm looking to see if they're project-based, because I want to do more like that. Because not only did I get a ton of great experience, but I also got something that I can add to my portfolio to show companies going forward into the career field. So, I think that how much I value the classes that are like this has increased.

In Kayla's case (considering she is still a student), the course shaped her professional identity by encouraging more deliberate choices about the type of work she wanted to pursue.

Together, these accounts show that professional identity formation did not happen through one common trajectory. While the majority of interviewees agreed that their experience with the course and the service-learning project helped them develop an understanding of professional roles and shaped their own professional identities, each student's experience was unique. Some students

22 Brianna S. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 28 August 2025.

23 Anna E. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 23 August 2025.

experienced ambiguity while identifying their strengths, others received affirmation of pre-existing career interests, and others chose to seek out similar project work to further develop their professional role contributions and unique identities.

In this way, the non-studio, project-based structure of PLAN 640 appears to have supported professional identity development by requiring students to test, articulate, and refine their roles in ambiguous, interdisciplinary settings. Rather than producing a uniform outcome, the course allowed students to navigate different pathways as they developed their professional identities.

Chapter Synthesis

This chapter shows that non-studio based service-learning supported professional role clarification and identity development in this planning course. Interview and survey findings indicate that understanding professional roles was central to many students' experiences in the PLAN 640 course. Furthermore, as students identified roles and responsibilities, many of them described a gradual development of their distinct professional identities. Although students described different trajectories—from ambiguity to affirmation—the interviews show a shared pattern: students developed professional roles and identities through real-world, interdisciplinary project work. In this course, role clarification and identity development emerged through engagement with clients, collaboration across disciplines, and the integration of theory and practice. These findings suggest that non-studio based service-learning can support professional role clarification in ways that complement existing studio-based models.

The next chapter examines a related dimension of this experience: how students described skill development, technical competency, and preparedness for practice.

Chapter 03.

Skill Development
Through
Interdisciplinary
Learning

Skill Development Through Interdisciplinary Learning

Interdisciplinary learning has become an increasingly important topic in higher education as educators argue that twenty-first century challenges require students to work across disciplinary boundaries. Advocates suggest that interdisciplinary education can help students think more critically and reflectively (Howlett et al., 2016). Additionally, Oudenampsen et al. (2024) note that interdisciplinary learning is still emerging as a clearly defined concept, and that little research on these educational models is grounded in empirical evidence. They recommend that greater attention to student learning outcomes in interdisciplinary learning is needed to strengthen the evidence in favor of these pedagogical models.

This chapter responds directly to that gap by examining how students developed and refined professional skills through the interdisciplinary learning environment in PLAN 640. Throughout interviews, students consistently described skill development as emerging primarily through two mechanisms: real-world project demands and interdisciplinary teamwork. The community-accountable project required students to communicate with their team and community members and set concrete deadlines for deliverables. Simultaneously, working across disciplines exposed students to new skillsets and workflows while reconciling different expectations for project outcomes and navigating challenges. Together, these competencies are central to planning practice, where planners are required to synthesize information, coordinate amongst professionals and community members, and facilitate collaboration. This chapter explores how students achieved professional skill development that applied to future professional or academic work. I also examine how skill development occurred in discipline-specific ways, in particular, how students gained planning-relevant skill knowledge in interdisciplinary teams. In this chapter, I treat “skill development” as both the acquisition of technical skills (e.g., research, graphics, writing, analysis, public presentation, etc.) and the strengthening of professional “soft skills” (e.g., communication, facilitation, teamwork, leadership, conflict management, etc.).

To examine these themes, I draw on both survey responses and interviews. Survey responses pertaining to interdisciplinary collaboration and professional preparation provide a broader overview of students’ learning outcomes, while interview narratives reveal how particular skills developed through moments of reciprocity, friction, and growth within teams. This finding emerged from survey data; 95% of respondents (or 58 of 61 respondents) somewhat or strongly agreed that the project helped them develop skills they found useful in professional practice. This pattern is important because it suggests that students broadly understood the course as professionally relevant, not only in terms of technical competency but in relation to a wider set of practice-oriented capacities. The survey therefore establishes that professional preparation was not an isolated perception held by a few interviewees, but a broader trend across respondents. The interviews clarified what components of the course aided their professional development, revealing that “professional preparation” was interpreted and obtained differently on an individual basis. Throughout interviews, students assigned different meanings to “skill development” as well, but patterns of consistency across student accounts clarify which specific skills this course helped refine.

This chapter is organized into four primary sections. First, I briefly outline the course project requirements and deliverables to provide context for the type of skills required for the coursework. I also expand on how interdisciplinary collaboration is facilitated, creating an environment for cross-disciplinary skill development. Second, I discuss how students learned through interdisciplinary collaboration and reciprocity with other students, supported by interview narratives. Then, I examine technical skill development, especially across planning-relevant and visualization-related skills. Additionally, I reference interview narrative themes of soft skill development. Communication skills

emerged as a consistent and important learning outcome, so I expand on students' perspectives surrounding this theme. This chapter concludes with a synthesis that reiterates the dominant themes across skill development in students' learning outcomes.

Course Structure and Skill Development

The project component of the PLAN 640 course is organized to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration and skill development as much as possible. Following the kickoff of the urban design visioning project, students were organized by the course instructor, Dr. Rishi, into interdisciplinary teams with relatively even disciplinary representation. This structure was intentional to ensure that academic disciplines were distributed as evenly as possible in project groups. Rather than allowing students to remain within their comfort zones, they gained collaboration skills and engaged in reciprocal skill development—an intentional core function of the course organization.

The semester project required interdisciplinary teams to develop and present an urban design visioning proposal, including site analysis, visualizations, proposed interventions, and public-facing presentation materials. Completing these deliverables required students to combine research, spatial analysis, graphic communication, and collaborative decision-making, which helps explain why the course became a site of both technical and interpersonal skill development. Figure 14 shows a sample final deliverable board.

This project structure also required students to use professional tools commonly associated with planning and design practice. Students used ArcGIS Pro to visualize site-specific data and conduct spatial analysis, while Adobe Creative Cloud programs such as Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign were used to refine maps, create diagrams, and produce photomontages. At the same time, each team selected a project focus area, such as housing, infrastructure, transportation, connectivity, or revitalization of older sites and buildings, in accordance with specific community priorities. This also helped them define a scope for their project and guided preliminary research before developing proposals. Altogether, this service-learning project was not just a classroom project, but an applied teamwork exercise intended to help students develop skills applicable to future professional work.

The PLAN 640 course structure also overlaps with many of the American Institute of Certified Planners' (AICP's²⁴) framework of core competencies for emerging professionals within urban planning practice (American Institute of Certified Planners [AICP], 2017). The AICP refers to professional work in planning as 'both wide and deep' and uses this framework to establish foundational skills that urban planners must obtain on their way to receiving their AICP professional credential. While PLAN 640 was not designed as a formal AICP training exercise, former students' survey and interview responses suggest that the course engaged many of the competencies associated with emerging planning practice, particularly in research, spatial analysis, written and graphic communication, presentation, facilitation, public participation, project management, and interdisciplinary collaboration. Rather than argue that this course yields mastery over any of these specific categories, I suggest that the course and project provided students with exposure to these kinds of tasks, communications, and problem-solving opportunities that reflect AICP values and competencies. The interview narratives in this chapter expand on specific skills and interdisciplinary learning across student experiences.

24 "The American Institute of Certified Planners provides the only nationwide, independent verification of planners' qualifications." as per the American Planning Association's (APA's) website. It acts as the professional oversight board for planning professions and administers professional accreditation examinations. From <https://www.planning.org/aicp/>

This helps explain why students so often described the course as professionally formative. As Chen et al. (2020) argue, urban planning education incorporating interdisciplinary work and experiential learning is vital in equipping students with the skills needed to address twenty-first century urban



Figure 14: Sample Final Poster Board. Student names and identifying information redacted to maintain anonymity. Source: K-State student work.

issues. This helps explain why students so often described the course as professionally formative. As Chen et al. (2020) argue, urban planning education incorporating interdisciplinary work and experiential learning is vital in equipping students with the skills needed to address twenty-first century urban issues. The PLAN 640 course serves as a direct example of this, combining seminar discussions and course readings with real-world, community-accountable, interdisciplinary project work. In this chapter, I argue that this combination of educational experiences created a triangulated course model through which students developed interdisciplinary skills-both technical skills and soft skills-that contributed toward their preparation for planning practice.

Learning Through Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Working in interdisciplinary groups helped students develop new skills by pushing them beyond typical, discipline-specific skills and ways of thinking. Instead, they were encouraged to work collaboratively, try new skills, and adapt their project work to become more community responsive. Our survey patterns reinforce this on a broad level. 57% (35 respondents out of 61) of those who completed the survey strongly agreed that the project prepared them for real-world professional practice in urban design, planning, or related fields. No respondents agreed or disagreed with this statement. This result suggests that students did not experience interdisciplinary collaboration as peripheral to the course, but as part of what made the project feel professionally relevant. In that sense, the survey points to a broad perception that the course simulated aspects of practice, while the interviews explain more concretely how students came to understand that relevance through teamwork, communication, and project responsibility. While the survey suggests that students across disciplines viewed the course positively in this regard, the interview data more clearly explains how this skill development occurred. Students often described interdisciplinary collaboration and communication skills as particularly useful and applicable in professional or academic work following their participation in PLAN 640. The following interviews highlight interview narratives that focus on how the interdisciplinary group work facilitated this learning.

In her interview, Mackenzie C., a fifth-year graduate student in landscape architecture, demonstrated how interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement changed the way she defined problems beyond her disciplinary scope. While Mackenzie was not a planning student, her perspective is valuable in understanding how non-planning students gained exposure to planning concepts and the scope of planning work. She explained how, in her landscape architecture coursework, most of her previous work focused on nature-based solutions and site-specific design interventions. However, in PLAN 640, her group shifted their proposal following discussions with community members to focus on economic development and housing. She described her initial surprise at the collective decision to focus on housing, as she had no previous experience studying housing or economic development proposals:

"I think [the engagement workshop] gave me a better idea of going about redeveloping the project and understanding which parts of the community they really valued...my project team was focused on housing, and housing was something the community really wanted and needed. If I had started the project before, without talking to the community, I probably wouldn't have had housing as a main part of our project." -Mackenzie C., Landscape Architecture Professional.²⁵

Another one of Mackenzie's reflections throughout her interview furthers that point. She acknowledged that housing was not an issue that she was initially prepared to address, but she described learning from site analysis and research, as well as conversations with community

25 Mackenzie C. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 26 August 2025.

members and group members. The shift in her logic is important because it indicates that skill development materialized not only through technical practice, but also through problem framing and ethical obligations. She was receptive to crossing disciplinary boundaries to focus on community-responsive project goals and learned along the way from community partners and group members.

“A lot of people in the community understand the need for housing...especially [for] bringing more people into the community...that’s a topic that I wasn’t going to look into at first, because I was like...housing? I don’t really know much about housing. But...I learned a lot, just based on research and talking to the community...Talking to the community helped shape the outcome of the project quite a bit.” -Mackenzie C.²⁶

Sara T., an architecture student when she participated in PLAN 640, raised a similar but distinct point. For Sara, interdisciplinary teamwork required her to relinquish individual control over the project and work collaboratively. Unlike her previous studio projects, where students like Sara worked individually and maintained creative control over their own work, PLAN 640 required her to work in assigned groups and shift the urban design proposal to respond to community feedback. Her interview reveals that exposure to larger-scale collaborative projects helped her develop a more team-oriented mindset, which was a valuable new perspective in her education. Sara joked that she “liked to be the boss” in making design decisions to achieve studio objectives, so the course helped her develop collaboration skills by integrating aspects of each group member’s vision. Additionally, it taught her that designers in practice are ethically obligated to prioritize community- and client-specified needs, instead of designing for their own personal preferences:

“Most of the projects and things I’d worked on were just individual projects that I was...the boss. I was making the rules. I made it look how I wanted it to look. I did what I wanted to do, but that’s not a good philosophy to have as a designer, and you should be designing for...the people that will be experiencing it specifically. Hearing back from people in the community about that is the best way to do that. I think that was a pretty pivotal moment in my design education, realizing that I might think I know what’s best, but I definitely do need the input of those that are going to be directly affected.”
Sara T., Architectural Designer.²⁷

This distinction is one of the most important findings across interviews; given that the learning outcomes of non-studio based learning are underexamined in planning and design education, Sara’s story suggests that this type of learning made collaborative accountability and its practical applications much more explicit than her previous studio coursework. She discussed how, in retrospect, that experience prepared her for professional practice as individual authority in design decision-making is atypical. Instead, she learned how to let other team members have equal authority over design interventions, relying on different skillsets and expertise in collaborative proposal development. In PLAN 640, the community partners filled the role of the “client” as the course shaped her understanding of proposal development. Sara’s reflection therefore shows how interdisciplinary teamwork and engagement together encouraged a more professionally realistic understanding of design responsibility.

This broader shift also changed how Sara understood the course’s value within her own education. Although Sara was not a planning student, her perspective is useful because it emphasizes the importance of interdisciplinary exposure to planning as a professional development experience:

“I think [this] was a pretty big key class to have in my overall education, even though I

26 Mackenzie C. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 26 August 2025.

27 Sara T. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

majoring in architecture, just having a little bit of that planning background helped just a bit. It developed me as a designer better and [helped] to just have a more rounded education.” -Sara T.²⁸

Kamryn C., an architecture graduate student, reinforces this broader pattern. Kamryn spoke more directly than Mackenzie and Sara about the professional reality of interdisciplinary collaboration. She explicitly stated that she wished there were more opportunities to work collaboratively with students across disciplines throughout her education because she realized the relevance of interdisciplinary work in professional practice:

“[This course] made me want to do more collaboration between the different disciplines. I actually wish we did a lot more of it in school, because it happens in the real world after school. I also think that hearing [community members’] perspectives on things helped me learn more about those things that I didn’t know about, so I’m able to apply those new pieces of knowledge in my own projects now, just because I learned from them.” -Kamryn C., Architecture Student.²⁹

She also connected community perspectives to her own continued learning, explaining that hearing from residents taught her things she could later apply in other projects. Kamryn’s account reinforces the broader argument that students valued interdisciplinary collaboration because it helped prepare them for realistic professional environments and client accountability. While Sara, Mackenzie, and Kamryn come from non-planning academic backgrounds, their narratives showcase how they learned about planning as a professional field. More importantly, they are collectively describing how they learned about planning concepts and strategies through interdisciplinary collaboration.

Across these interviews, interdisciplinary collaboration and community engagement influenced students’ design proposals by pushing them to relinquish individual control of their work and respond to community feedback. Students described learning to delegate responsibilities while also helping with tasks less familiar to their respective disciplines. They also emphasized how they incorporated community input and reconsidered design decisions in response to community needs. In some cases, they worked beyond scopes of their individual academic disciplines to achieve particular goals and outcomes. These experiences align with several AICP professional competencies, particularly those related to public participation, communication, facilitation, and ethical responsibility, but the student evidence itself makes the broader point explicit. Students found interdisciplinary group work in PLAN 640 to be meaningful because it required them to incorporate various perspectives and prioritize community responsiveness over individual preferences.

Reciprocal Learning Across Disciplines

The interdisciplinary teamwork component of PLAN 640 created a reciprocal learning environment in which students gained skills and perspectives they had not previously encountered in their own programs. Across interviews, students did not describe interdisciplinary work solely as being exposed to other viewpoints and experiences. Instead, they described learning that changed their perspectives on problem-framing, their assessment feasibility in proposal development, and their collaborative production of deliverables. Two main patterns emerged across student narratives: first, design students learned more about planning processes, programmatic ways of thinking from planning students, and feasibility considerations. Second, students exchanged technical and graphic skills across disciplines to collectively produce project deliverables.

28 Sara T. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

29 Kamryn C. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 28 August 2025.

Max's reflection shows an example of how interdisciplinary collaboration expanded their project scope beyond design alone. He emphasized that including other disciplines in the groups did not just "add new perspectives". Instead, their contributions extended much further, helping the team think about their proposal much more strategically:

"I think it's important that we have different majors in [the class], even the business major. I think it helped...because she had different perspectives on...what kind of businesses and why we have certain businesses there...I don't have that business mindset, really...the planner in our group, obviously he had a lot of different perspectives as well, helping us think about the broader picture, because we did a whole corridor, so he helped with that." -Max P., Architectural Designer.³⁰

His reflection is important because it demonstrates that interdisciplinary collaboration changed what Max counted as relevant knowledge for the project. As he states, the business student introduced economic considerations beyond Max's scope of knowledge, while the planning student pushed their group to consider broader community context. This way, the collaboration element of the course shifted their project proposal toward a broader-scale strategic effort. Additionally, Max provides useful insight into the course structure and its impact on students across disciplines.

Sawyer reinforces this point in a more programmatic way. Recalling the brownfield sites in his group's project area, he explained that the planning student proposed new uses for potential redevelopment, helping the design students think further than visual design elements:

"I think our planning student proposed several good [elements]...we had the brownfield site, which was this old factory, we had a parking garage that was not doing so great...and then there was this old hotel...I think our planning student did a good job of exploring what could go in each of those beyond just how do the architecture students make the things look nice for the presentation? I think having that kind of fresh vision helped." -Sawyer P., Architectural Designer.³¹

Sawyer's experience shows that interdisciplinary learning helped him move beyond design and visualization thinking, requiring him to problem-solve around programmatic and implementation-oriented thinking. His account suggests that working with a planning student exposed him to new design interventions that he previously did not consider. Importantly, the planning student in his group did not just contribute ideas; instead, their ideas addressed implementation, site use, and realistic redevelopment problems.

Furthermore, Sam's reflection reiterates this idea, making his understanding of feasibility more explicit. He described the real estate student as the mediator between what their vision was and what might be feasible, emphasizing how their perspectives highlighted new considerations that he would not normally encounter in design work:

"I think having somebody that was in the real estate degree [in my group] was very interesting, because that's a completely different mindset, and I think it's an important one. Considering what we were doing...downtown, you've got to think about...who's going to be in the buildings, and how we're going to pay to put the buildings there. So, I definitely think that was very interesting, and something that I don't normally think about on projects." -Sam H., Landscape Designer.³²

30 Max P. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 December 2025.

31 Sawyer P. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 14 July 2025.

32 Sam H. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 5 November 2025.

Sam's account is helpful because he names feasibility directly. His experience in the course shows that interdisciplinary collaboration broadened the project from a design exercise to larger-scale development proposal. Together, Max, Sawyer, and Sam demonstrate that interdisciplinary collaboration was not only an exchange of perspectives, but it expanded design students' understanding of feasibility and broader-context program in community-accountable projects.

Another form of reciprocal learning was explicitly technical. Mackenzie's reflection shows that interdisciplinary collaboration strengthened her site analysis and spatial analysis skills. Instead of focusing on feasibility or policy exposure, she explicitly mentioned the production of project deliverables through new tools. Mackenzie was focused specifically on the community context and GIS analysis aspects that she learned in the course:

"I think one way that my team was really helpful was...what is it, ArcGIS? That was super helpful, because we don't get into that as much. So just doing that initial background research was really helpful for the outcome of our project. I think I definitely leaned on my team to help out with that research and making diagrams for that. I think that's something that I couldn't have done [on my own], but because it was an interdisciplinary team, we were able to have a well-rounded project." Mackenzie C., Landscape Architecture Professional.³³

Mackenzie's experience shows that interdisciplinary work supported technical learning in addition to conceptual knowledge. Among design students, several expressed appreciation for the RECD and RCP students' skills in spatial analysis, broader policy understanding, and community-contextualized site research. In this sense, reciprocal learning also improved the quality of the team's analytical deliverables throughout the project-especially in areas such as GIS analysis, background research, and assessments of communities' existing conditions.

Tara L., a senior in RECD, provides a clear example of reciprocity in technical skills exchange. Similar to design students learning analytical skills from planning and real estate students, Tara affirmed that she sharpened her technical and graphic design skills through interdisciplinary collaboration:

Avery: ...what specific skills do you feel like you developed through the class?

Tara: I think technically, because [Architecture Student] and [Landscape Architecture Student] did help us...with the more creative parts...like Photoshop and Illustrator, because we learned the basics in 510 and how to do things.³⁴ But since they have been in architecture, and they took the digital architecture classes...they were able to help us with the more creative design of things for our main poster.

Tara: It kind of started as [Planning Student] and I doing the maps...then we sent the file to [Landscape Architecture Student] and [Architecture Student], and they spruced it up and made it better, but they helped us understand some of the components of how to make it look better. I guess that's kind of a skill...collaboration. -Tara L., Real Estate Graduate.³⁵

Tara frames skill development as collaborative and aggregated over time, rather than deficit based. This is an important finding because initial apprehensions surrounding group work as discussed by design students often involved a perceived gap in technical capabilities. Instead, design students'

33 Mackenzie C. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 26 August 2025.

34 Tara is referring to PLAN 510 (Graphic Composition or Representation for Planners), the lab component designed to accompany PLAN 640.

35 Tara L. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

reflections highlighted the importance of planning students' analytical skills and broader policy knowledge related to community contexts. In Tara's case, she described her team's workflow as collaborative by improving each other's materials and teaching each other as they progressed. Her story is exceptionally useful in demonstrating that interdisciplinary collaboration was not only conceptual, but also directly applicable to project production. Tara's account, along with multiple other students, highlights that reciprocal learning moved both ways, especially through design software, graphics, and visualization support.

Survey responses support this pattern, while the interviews explain how interdisciplinary collaboration improved both project outcomes and student learning. Taken together, the survey and interview data suggest that interdisciplinary learning was experienced not simply as exposure to other perspectives, but as active process of exchanging knowledge and skillsets across disciplines. Planning students often described relying on peers for help with visualization and presentation, while design students discussed growth in feasibility thinking, policy awareness, and project community context. Rather than siloing themselves in one particular disciplinary role or responsibility, students were receptive to working across disciplines and learning from one another to achieve different goals and complete various tasks. They described group work as a structured environment in which they spanned conceptual and technical aspects beyond their typical scopes of work.

Taken together, these findings show that interdisciplinary collaboration functioned not just as a course requirement, but as a key mechanism of professional learning across disciplines. Students described this course as helping them integrate feasibility, accountability, and collaboration in ways that felt professionally meaningful. They were not simply dividing labor; rather, they learned how complementary skillsets and background knowledge could improve the efficacy of their projects and contribute to the creation of stronger final deliverables.

Technical Skill Development Through Interdisciplinary Collaboration

For planning and RECD students in particular, technical skill development emerged as one of the clearest benefits of the interdisciplinary learning model. While all of these students were simultaneously enrolled in PLAN 510, they described the PLAN 640 project as a special opportunity to apply those technical skills in a client- and team-accountable environment that pushed them to improve. Specifically, many students explained that their visualization and graphic design skills improved as a result of working with design students to produce high-quality deliverables for the final presentation. Most importantly, the course provided meaningful opportunities to develop technical and visual communication skills that students understood as directly relevant to portfolios, internships, and early professional practice.

Anna E., a planning student, described the course as an opportunity to strengthen her technical and visual communication skills by learning from design students in her project group. Her initial reflection makes clear that she approached the final presentation board not just as an assignment, but as an opportunity to push her own technical skillset in ways that felt professionally relevant:

"I do remember just wanting to make sure that I...I pushed the board because that was really my first chance to take another crack at that and get exposure to it. Since... we really didn't do posters like some of the architects do in the hallways of their work... that was probably one of my first bucket items. I would probably say...I want this to look good because I want to use this in my portfolio. I think I did try....a shoddy rendering of what we thought a 3D sign could look like. I took a stab at that, thinking,

‘Oh my gosh, I just accomplished everything,’ but I think I was just trying to push my technical ability as much as I could...” -Anna E.³⁶

This recollection demonstrates that Anna saw visual communication as an important skill for her own professional growth instead of a secondary skill necessary to create project deliverables. She connected the quality of her group’s final presentation board directly to her own portfolio creation, and she engaged in graphic design experimentation as a challenge to navigate in order to further her own skillset, making herself more professionally capable for future opportunities. This was a key exercise in Anna’s professional identity building.

Rather than treating the gap in her technical skills compared to design students as a hinderance in completing project deliverables, Anna embraced these challenges as a way to learn from senior design students. Additionally, rather than treating her skill gap as a reason to disengage from specific tasks, she tackled them head-on, relying on her team members to help her develop her digital visualization skills. She described delving into complex graphic design tasks that she had previously not encountered in her planning education:

“I would say probably the only time I ever felt...disconnected [from my group] was when we got into renderings, just because...we weren’t very skilled in photo renderings. We weren’t learning how to do 3D models or SketchUp or anything of that sort to integrate...how we were trying to visualize it. That’s the one thing that I think is really kind of the telltale difference in what a landscape architect can do...compared to me, is that I’m not very comfortable with SketchUp and building out different models, and so I have to kind of lean on them to help me with those digital visualizations.”

Anna E.³⁷

Here, Anna recognizes and explicitly names a technical skill gap that evolved from initial discomfort to professional growth. She was extremely aware of her disciplinary skills developed through her education at that point as opposed to design students’ specialization in graphic communication means. Her narrative suggests that graphic design and communication became professionally meaningful because it was a collaborative effort in PLAN 640. She honed those skills by working with peers whose expertise was different from her own, and she later connected that experience to her ability to work with designers in practice.

Kayla’s description of skill development supports a similar but distinct claim. While Anna demonstrates how technical skill development happened through discomfort and learning from peers in design disciplines, Kayla shows how students directly applied deliverable outputs to portfolio-building. She described the project as one of the first opportunities she received to assemble a professional body of work that highlighted her skills:

“We hadn’t really had a lot of opportunities to build out portfolio projects yet. Before this class...I didn’t have anything to put in a portfolio...I had a map, but that doesn’t make a portfolio, that shows one skill. So, being able to show examples of what I was capable of helped me get better job opportunities. I think from a professional standpoint, [it was a] portfolio upgrade, and learning about different styles of [graphics in] planning was cool.” -Kayla R.³⁸

Her description of the project as a “portfolio upgrade” makes the relevance of technical skills

36 Anna E. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 23 August 2025.

37 Anna E. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 23 August 2025.

38 Kayla R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 17 July 2026.

development clear. Kayla is fundamentally describing how she learned new graphic approaches while she integrated mapping, design, professional writing, conceptual understanding, and community context into one cohesive project. Unlike previous planning coursework Kayla had completed that focused on one particular competency, the PLAN 640 project required students to integrate a wide variety of skills into one proposal. Kayla states that this process, she later discovered, made the coursework exceptionally useful for internships and early career opportunities.

Collectively, Anna and Kayla show that technical skills development in this non-studio based service-learning course was connected to interdisciplinary group work and structured collaboration. Students described learning how to create stronger visualizations and graphic deliverables while simultaneously ensuring that the work was easily communicated outside of classroom settings. Additionally, they connected those benefits to their professional experiences following completion of the course—especially in portfolio development, interviews, and professional practice. Interview narratives indicate that interdisciplinary group work and structured collaboration through coursework were key factors in developing technical skills and confidence in students.

Communication, Collaboration, and Adaptive Thinking

Beyond technical skills, students repeatedly described the course as a major catalyst in their soft skill development. Their reflections consistently centered on three related dimensions: communication, collaboration, and adaptive thinking. These skills developed through a combination of interdisciplinary teamwork, community engagement, and revision of proposals in response to real-world constraints. Rather than occurring as a byproduct of group work, soft skills were formed through the structure of the non-studio based, community-engaged learning model.

a. Communication Skills for Professional Practice

Anna's reflection provides a clear example of learning communication skills by catering to specific audiences. Describing the open house presentation, she emphasized that the course helped her and her team learn how to explain and defend their proposal decisions to community members:

"I think especially going back to the public event that we had at the end of the course, it made us equipped to have those conversations with the residents and sufficiently answer questions. And some people at public events always try to stump you with different questions and be like, "Well, did you think about this?" and we were capable and had the knowledge to answer back to those things and say, "Yeah, we did think about it, but when we considered x, y and z, we had to respond in this manner. And so that was why this decision was made," so I think it gave us that baseline...to translate into productive conversations back with the residents and instill a little bit more trust in our decisions as young 20 year olds, telling them what they could maybe do." -Anna E.

on **Communication Skills**

Her reflection shows that communication skill development was not just beneficial to public presentation abilities, but it also involved the justification of her decisions and responses to challenges. She also recalled describing planning concepts in accessible language. Beyond presenting ideas, students learned how to speak in ways that were understandable and credible to the general public.

Broader interview data points in the same direction. Students described communication in several forms, including presenting confidently, asking appropriate questions, speaking with professionals, and communicating technical ideas in language that community members could easily understand. Some students also noted managing a balance between using discipline-specific language to convey

competence in professional settings and clear, nontechnical vocabulary in community meetings. In this way, communication skill development in the class was fundamentally adaptive.

This finding is consistent with literature and professional framing. Planning practice requires communication across a broad range of audiences, and both the AICP and American Planning Association (APA) consistently discuss why professional planners should give special emphasis to these abilities.³⁹ The AICP explicitly treats communication as a core competency in professional work (Appendix). Dandekar and Clark (1992) posit that communication skill development is under-studied in planning education, while Smith et al. (1998) argue that visual communication skills are among the most important in planning practice. Guzzetta and Bollens (2003) as well as Megahed et al. (2020) reinforce this claim, arguing that strong communication skills are the most valuable for emerging professional planners to possess.

Collectively, these interviews suggest that communication skill development occurred through the intentional structure of the course, rather than as a byproduct. Students were required to shift across interdisciplinary collaboration, technical work, and community engagement, teaching them how to adapt in terms of communication. This ability is critical in planning practice, where professionals must constantly communicate across design, analysis, and public presentation.

b. Collaboration and Teamwork in Professional Practice

Collaboration learning in this course involved more than simply working in groups. Students described developing collaboration skills through assigned teams and navigating challenges across uneven skill levels and educational seniority. The strongest pattern across interviews is that collaboration required students to share authorship of their work, adapt to others' abilities, and trust their group members to fulfill requirements that they could not control on their own.

Kamryn discusses this explicitly:

"...it was really good to be able to collaborate. I mean, obviously, it also helped with my collaboration skills, because working with a group of people is not typically what I have done so far in school...working with a group of people specifically that didn't have the same skill set as me was a really good experience." -Kamryn C. on

Collaboration/Teamwork Skills

Her comment is useful in clarifying that the value of the interdisciplinary teamwork was the collaboration across different skill sets. Kamryn's perspective is especially useful, because she indicates that collaboration was not only beneficial for underclassmen or planning students. Instead, collaborative work introduced her to the planning students' workflows and approaches to visioning projects. Her reflection procures one of the most important findings of this section: teamwork was professionally meaningful when students had to work with others whose education, strengths, and workflows differed significantly from their own.

Although Kamryn describes the value of collaboration and teamwork, she is also clear that the process was not frictionless. In her case, interdisciplinary work required students to handle differing technical capabilities early in the project:

"We definitely had a little bit of difficulty at the beginning, especially with technical differences. Not everybody in the group...had a personal computer, so we just navigated that by going to the computer lab together and we would work there

39 One example can be found here: <https://www.planning.org/planning/2025/jul/master-the-message-6-time-tested-tips-for-better-communication/>

all as a group, and then when we needed to, we could all split off, but honestly, communication was the key to being able to navigate those differences.” -Kamryn C.

This adds an important caveat to this chapter’s argument. Interdisciplinary teamwork was professionally useful because group members had to reconcile skill gaps and scheduling constraints. In retrospect, students like Kamryn grew to understand the parallels between navigating those challenges and applications to professional practice.

Sally’s interview adds more nuance to this process of how collaboration skills were developed:

“So, it was divided into groups, and I don’t remember if we picked them or if we were assigned them. Both are always stressful for me personally, because if I pick them, not knowing a lot of other students in the class is stressful. And then if I’m assigned, but I do know someone in that class, it is more stressful.” -Sally H., Landscape Designer.⁴⁰

Initially, Sally admitted that it was hard to let herself be assigned to a group with people that she was less familiar with, mostly because she did not know what to expect when it came to workflows and overall expectations. However, in retrospect, she described that same structure as valuable preparation for professional practice:

“Making it into interdisciplinary group projects is a good idea, because I think a lot of times when you’re working in an office, you’re collaborating with other people, right? You’re not usually going to be doing a project by yourself, there’s usually two or three other people, at least, in your team. So, I think it’s good experience to do that, because a lot of times in school, I feel like the work is individual. So having a teamwork aspect, I think, is always helpful, because that’s what reality is outside of school.” -Sally H.⁴¹

Sally jokingly gestured to her boss, who was sitting right next to her on the video call, as she discussed working with other people. Her account was not simply a generic endorsement of teamwork; instead, it demonstrates that collaboration involved learning how to share authorship and relinquish control over specific parts of a project. In many design studio contexts, such as Sally’s previous studio experiences, students individually composed work and received individual evaluations. In the PLAN 640 course, students had to compromise on decisions and trust other teammates with specific deliverables. This shift is exceptionally relevant to professional practice, where planning and urban design processes involve multi-step decision making that involves several different parties.

This is also consistent with literature connecting these disciplines to professional practice. Kleinsmann et al. (2012) highlight the value of collaboration amongst students at different stages in their academic careers. They also suggest that this skill development occurs “on the job”. Our interviews show that students in this course began cultivating collaboration skills by working across disciplines, different skillsets, and different stages in their education. In courses like PLAN 640, these skills are demonstrably learned prior to entering professional roles rather than on the job after entering practice.

c. Problem-Solving & Adaptive Thinking

Students did not always name “problem-solving” or “adaptive thinking” explicitly, but their narratives repeatedly described how they reconsidered assumptions, responded to feedback, and adjusted their proposals. In this section, the strongest pattern across interviews is iterative revision to make

40 Sally H. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 16 September 2026.

41 Sally H. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 16 September 2026.

projects reflect community priorities and integrate feedback. Students described changing their ideas to respond to feasibility concerns, group dynamics, and community-defined priorities, similar to professional planning processes of iteration.

Mary's experience best captures the act of balancing visioning and practical constraints:

"There were plenty of conversations about...what can we do to better this area of Wichita...I think that we did not bring in the economic cost of what everything would be, more... this is the best case scenario for what we would want. There were a couple of conversations during the class of like, yes, this is great to dream big and think of everything that would be awesome in Wichita, but you do have to look at...what can actually be done in that area." -Mary M. on **Problem Solving/Adaptive Thinking Skills**

Her comment shows that adaptive thinking in the PLAN 640 course emerged through her group's need to reconcile visioning aspirations with feasibility. While she described big ideas and ambitions her group proposed, the main point Mary makes is that their proposal had to change to compromise with realistic solutions, informed by feedback from stakeholders. Her shifting from "dreaming big" to considering implementation is one of the clearest ways to demonstrate how the course simulated professional practice.

Another instance of adaptive thinking happened through disciplinary reframing in response to community priorities. Mackenzie, a landscape architecture student, explained that housing as a central concern pushed her to think about design solutions from a perspective that she had never considered before. "Maybe I don't do that...every day, but I do have that similar process every day, just talking to...my team and then creating something, getting feedback, and then presenting a final product," she told me. Mackenzie's story highlights adaptive thinking not only through refining her team's proposal, but also through reframing what problems they are addressing in the first place.

Furthermore, Kayla's experience provides the strongest example of a substantial project shift following community engagement exercises:

"At first we were doing pretty broad strokes in terms of the suggestions that we had, but after our...meeting, we realized that they really, really cared about housing and how they were going to build generational wealth through housing...so we had to shift our focus very heavily to zoom in on what housing was going to look like, how it was going to happen, and how we were going to do it...originally we did have housing... in our overview, but it wasn't a key component, and we had to make it [central]...like I said, when you're in academia...you meet with someone in person, and you realize that that's the key driver for a lot of things, and you have to shift perspectives to best accommodate that." -Kayla R.⁴²

Her example makes the adaptive nature of the course especially clear. Kayla described her team reorienting the project once community priorities became more clearly defined through engagement activities. In this case, adaptive thinking happened through direct engagement with residents and the understanding that a technically plausible proposal was not necessarily what the community had in mind.

Chapter Synthesis

This chapter contributes empirical evidence to an ongoing need for outcome-based assessment of interdisciplinary learning in higher education (Oudenampsen et al., 2024). More specifically, it

42 Kayla R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 17 July 2026.

shows that students in PLAN 640 described skill development as emerging through two primary pathways: the demands of a real-world, community-accountable project, and the collaborative dynamics of interdisciplinary teamwork. Survey results established that students broadly viewed the course as useful for professional practice, while the interviews clarified how that preparation took shape through both technical and interpersonal forms of learning. Throughout interviews and survey responses, students did not find these experiences to be secondary to the “real” work in the course. Instead, they described them as the conditions under which meaningful learning happened. The direction to produce quality deliverables, respond to community input, and work across disciplines pushed students to develop skills that they later applied to professional practice.

These findings demonstrate that technical and soft skill development were directly intertwined. Students developed technical proficiency through site analysis, visual communication, research, and production of deliverables for public display—something they often achieved by learning from peers in other disciplines. Simultaneously, they described growth in their communication, collaboration, and adaptive thinking skills. These themes emerged typically through shared responsibilities, integration of feasibility dimensions, and adherence to community priorities. Importantly, students did not just attribute these skills to academic coursework. They connected them to portfolio development, internships, employability, teamwork, and future professional projects. Taken together, these findings suggest that non-studio, interdisciplinary service-learning supported technical and soft skill development in ways that students later understood as directly relevant to professional practice.

Chapter 04.

Meaningful/
Impactful Work &
Applied Learning

Meaningful/Impactful Work & Applied Learning

This chapter examines how students understood the interdisciplinary service-learning project as meaningful and how those experiences functioned as applied learning. In doing so, it brings together two closely related dimensions of the course experience: first, the extent to which students experienced the work as personally, professionally, or civically significant, and second, the ways in which the project helped them connect classroom learning to real-world planning and design practice. Together, these themes show that the value of the course extended beyond technical or soft skill development alone. Students described the project as shaping their sense of professional purpose, ethical responsibility, and preparedness for future work.

These findings emerged across interviews following survey data collection. While students expressed value in the skills they learned in this course and positive attitudes overall, I was interested in other ways that positive experiences were formed. Therefore, this section of the thesis provides more detailed insight into the overall positive attitudes toward general course experiences. The previous chapters explored what new concepts and skills students learned, while this chapter seeks to understand why particular moments or experiences stayed with students over time. One major finding across interview data was student accounts of particularly meaningful experiences or interactions that shaped their positive perspectives on the course. For students across disciplines, meaning was assigned in different ways. In many cases, meaningfulness and applied learning were connected. Students described how applying their work in real scenarios affirmed their career path and future interests, which created a meaningful experience. This chapter explores how meaningful experiences were defined, and what aspects of the course contributed to these positive experiences for students.

Meaningful & Impactful Work

In engaged service-learning, students often describe their work as meaningful or impactful, but those terms do not always mean the same thing. Students enter community-engaged work with different motivations—some are drawn to service-learning through prior experience, personal gratification, commitment to community service, or a desire to facilitate social change. Others are more interested in seeing the effects of planning processes and decisions, with meaningful or fulfilling work emerging through project outcomes. Prior research suggests that meaningfulness can be understood both subjectively and through broader indicators of impact. For example, Prentice and Robinson (2010) found that students who engaged in service-learning coursework scored higher than non-service learners across several categories, including civic responsibility, global understanding, and citizenship.

Similarly, large-scale longitudinal studies show that service-learning can be impactful across settings. Astin et al. (2000) draw on data from 22,000+ undergraduate students and found that service-learning contributed positively to several academic outcomes. Beyond academics, real-world relevant values that were demonstrably improved included leadership, future interest in service career work, and intent to participate in voluntary service after college. Their most substantial findings show that the most important factor related to positive experiences within service-learning was the student's level of interest in course subject matter. The second most significant factor was whether the course facilitated in-class discussions. The significance of in-class discussion also suggests that non-studio, discussion-centered course formats may offer distinctive advantages for service-learning pedagogy, particularly when reflection and collective interpretation are central to the learning process. Other scholarship also points to project success as another source of student motivation, for example, instances where students' work produced tangible outcomes (Bradford,

2005). Together, this literature shows that service-learning can be impactful in multiple ways, but it does not fully explain how students themselves narrate meaningful moments or how those moments shape their long-term professional identities.

Similar to these previous studies that highlight observable benefits of service-learning based on student accounts, our survey revealed broader trends in positive outcomes and personal experiences with the course. Trends of project success, sustained engagement, and impact on professional identity are also observable in survey data trends. Of 61 respondents to this question, 70% (or 43 respondents) strongly agreed that they prefer service-learning to traditional classroom learning (Figure 15). Retrospectively, 67% (or 41 respondents) strongly agreed that the university-community partnership was productive within the project (Figure 16). These findings broadly summarize positive student attitudes toward service-learning and positive interactions with community members. They are important because they show that students' positive assessments of the course were not limited to isolated interview accounts, but appeared as broader patterns across respondents. At the same time, the survey results do not by themselves explain what students found meaningful or why particular moments stayed with them over time. However, they do not by themselves explain specifics of what students found meaningful or why particular moments stayed with students over time.

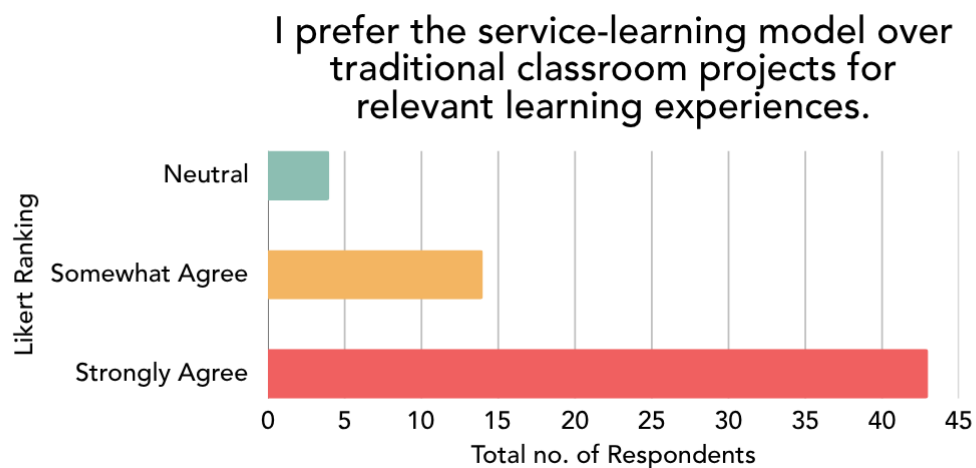


Figure 15: Survey Results on Educational Model Preferences. Source: Author.

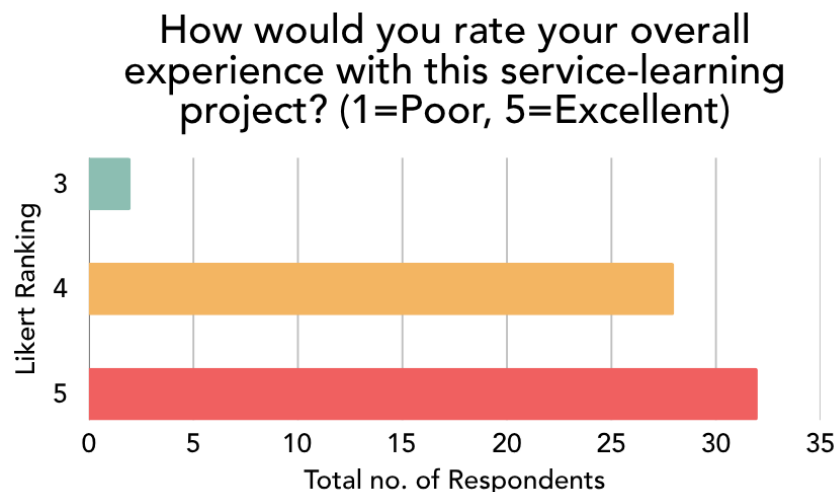


Figure 16: Survey Results on Partnership Productivity. Source: Author.

Initially, open responses to the survey indicated that positive outcomes were shaped by personal investment in the course and project. To investigate this theme further, the semi-structured interviews included questions about meaningful work or particular moments that stood out to students as meaningful. Based on the survey questions themselves, I anticipated that positive experiences grew from memorable learning and unique engagement opportunities. While this was one aspect of the course that many interviewees reflected on, interviews revealed that the positive attitudes toward the course were largely because students saw meaning and value in the service-learning project. Students recalled specific conversations or interactions that held emotional weight, or in some cases, they felt a sense of ethical obligation when they were tasked with community-accountable work that contributed to their positive experiences.

Meaningful Moments in Student Work

Across interviews, students identified specific moments, interactions, and realizations that made their service-learning work feel especially meaningful. These moments mattered because they helped students connect community-engaged work to their own values and ethics, evoking empathy and influencing their professional futures. The interview narratives below show that meaningfulness took different forms across student experiences, but in nearly every instance, it contributed to professional identity formation. For example, Tara's story illustrates an important dimension of meaningfulness through her description of authenticity and personal value alignments across her interactions with community members. This demonstrates that meaningfulness can emerge when students see their own concerns and social justice inclinations reflected in community experiences.

Tara L., a RECD student, worked on the Dunbar project, located adjacent to the Truman Sports Complex in Kansas City, Missouri. The Leeds-Dunbar neighborhood, one of Kansas City's first Black neighborhoods, has a long-standing, politically active neighborhood association committed to revitalization (Heart of the City Neighborhood Association). Tara emphasized that the opportunity to work directly with a community partner made this course unique from her other academic experiences. When asked about her overall impression of the project, she told me:

"I really liked it. I feel like it's the only service-learning project I had done in my four years in college, and so without having an internship, I really enjoyed being able to actually be out of the classroom and work on some real world projects that are actually happening, where people can actually take our ideas and try and come up with something and work [toward] some kind of solution. So, the Dunbar project specifically, is what I want to do, basically. I really enjoyed doing it." -Tara L., RECD Student.⁴³

This quote shows that Tara experienced the PLAN 640 service-learning project as meaningful because it felt much more real and consequential than previous projects, and it closely aligned with her developing career interests. For Tara, meaningfulness was connected to authenticity. The feeling that her work extended beyond the classroom exercise and engaged with a real community facing real issues was compelling to her.

Tara's account also shows that meaning was found through personal connection with the community's experiences. When I asked her what aspect of the project or particular moment felt the most meaningful, she related the project to her own background and to her mother's experiences working as a public school teacher:

"I think hearing about their experiences was the most meaningful, just because I also didn't grow up in a very affluent neighborhood and a very diverse area...but actually

seeing how it affects when a neighborhood is more specifically just African-Americans, or people who are impoverished, it opens your eyes more. I feel like the most meaningful [moment] to me was hearing their experiences and realizing a lot of people kind of live in their own bubble, even if I did grow up in an area that was very diverse...

My mom was a high school teacher, there were kids that she knows that went to the same school as me, their only meal was the school lunch that day...So, my mom was the teacher that always brought in breakfast for students. She would have coffee and oatmeal...in her classroom. She would have extra school supplies if their parents couldn't afford them. She would have coats for wintertime and all this. I learned that from her...getting to hear about other people and their experiences, I'm a huge empath, so even if it makes me sad hearing about it, it's meaningful." -Tara L.⁴⁴

Tara fanned her face as she teared up. "Oh my gosh. I'm gonna cry," she told me as she laughed. The importance of Tara's account is not simply that it was emotional, but that it activated a personal connection between her own experience and the stories shared by community members. Her connection to the community's lived experiences made her project feel more than an academic achievement. It also expanded her understanding of community disinvestment and how social justice concerns can influence development patterns in planning processes.

Tara then described how her experience in the course shaped her professional identity, discussing how she became interested in proactive solutions for addressing social justice concerns and inequities:

"Seeing...real world issue[s], not just in Kansas City, not just in Dunbar specifically, but everywhere, no matter where you go...Whatever the case may be...it helps me realize this is really opening my eyes, this really is going on, not just in my city where I grew up. It made me more curious to look at where else this is happening. What else can we do? Even after the class, I did a little bit more research on the history of Dunbar, and then looking at other areas in Kansas City, in different states...there's homeless camps and there's people that are impoverished, but I feel like I didn't realize how many communities are out there that are being disinvested [in] by the city, or that have maybe a lot of environmental issues that obviously the members themselves can't do anything about so I feel like it helped me understand what I want to do with my career." -Tara L.⁴⁵

She also recalled that the course project was featured in the Kansas City Star, one of the metro area's biggest newspapers. For Tara, that recognition mattered because it showed her that community-engaged planning work could create real impact that lasted outside of the classroom. In Tara's case, meaningfulness happened through personal connection with community experience and growing awareness of equity dimensions of planning. For Tara, this project helped her clarify her long-term career aspirations. Her account shows how meaningfulness can emerge through personal identification with community experience and a growing awareness of structural inequity. The next example highlights a different but equally important dimension of meaningful work: the sense of validation and reciprocity that can emerge when students experience community engagement as collaborative, supportive, and professionally affirming.

Max P., an architecture student, explained that the enthusiasm of the community partners in his PLAN 640 project was especially impactful. Especially compared to the engagement he participated

44 Tara L. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

45 Tara L. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 8 September 2025.

in later professional settings, the partners he worked with in the course were extremely willing to engage with students and provide constructive feedback. Max explained that, despite his subsequent experiences, the positive interactions he recalled from PLAN 640 stuck with him:

“In that class, it was very positive. We had very positive interactions. Everybody was super nice and engaging and wanted to help...lately, the community engagement I’ve done at work seems to be more negative in the field. Like, people who go to engagement meetings are just there to talk about how they don’t like your project, and how they don’t want it in their backyard, the NIMBY⁴⁶ people.

I feel like maybe that’s why architects don’t enjoy community engagement that much... we have a project we were working on. They’re converting an old frat house into a synagogue, and everybody hates it because they’re going to take parking away from the rest of the street, but it’s a trashy house that they’re converting into a place of worship, and people don’t like that. So, everybody who went to the meeting was talking down on it and how they hate that stuff, whereas the communication we did in PLAN 640, everybody was really supportive of what we wanted to do. Maybe because we’re students, but it was all good experiences in that class...it was good.” -Max P., Architecture Student.⁴⁷

Max’s experience indicates that meaningfulness can emerge not only from emotional connection, but also from experiencing community engagement as collaborative, affirming, and professionally different from the negative expectations that sometimes surround practice.

Max also connected this experience to his future career interests. He explained that PLAN 640 was his first time interacting directly with community members. “I feel like in architecture, there is a disconnect between what we design and who we’re designing for. So having that face to face interaction with the stakeholders is something that was pretty valuable,” he explained to me. He was in the process of completing a community engagement fellowship at a design school before preparing to start a professional position. When I interviewed him, he described PLAN 640 as critically influential in encouraging his commitment to community-engaged work early in his education.

Whereas Max’s experience emphasizes professional validation through positive engagement, Kevin’s narrative adds another layer by reflecting on how course structure and sustained partnership shape the meaning students assign to service-learning work. His perspective is especially valuable because it allows comparison across studio-based and non-studio formats, making visible how course design itself can influence whether engaged work feels reciprocal, ethical, and lasting. This perspective is especially valuable, because he participated in studio-based service-learning as a landscape architecture student before transitioning to the RECD program and later experienced service-learning through PLAN 640 through a non-studio based format. He told me that he worked on the Marysville, KS, project in the landscape architecture course section in 2019 before he completed the PLAN 640 Wichita project in 2024. Reflecting on these two experiences, Kevin explained:

“We worked with Northview in one of my studios in landscape architecture, and we did a bunch of plans for the Northview⁴⁸ community. Then semester ended, we stepped away and said, ‘Okay, see you guys later.’ It’s really hard to get the community

46 “NIMBY” stands for “Not in my Backyard”, referring to residents that oppose certain development in or near to their neighborhoods.

47 Max P. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 December 2025.

48 Northview is a neighborhood located east of Tuttle Creek Blvd. in Manhattan, Kansas.

members' hopes up, and they get all excited about the ideas of their neighborhood changing and being able to envision through the visuals that you produce as a student, what that neighborhood or community could become. Being able to work with the downtown improvement district of Wichita, working with the City Council of Marysville, both those two had the potential to actually implement those changes, being able to hear from residents and help guide the feedback that you're going to be giving to the city or to the downtown improvement district. In this case, it is definitely a lot more impactful. -Kevin K., Real Estate and Community Development Professional.⁴⁹

His comparison is important because it makes the pedagogical contrast especially clear. His narrative suggests that the non-studio based format created a more sustained relationship with the community compared to a more abrupt studio-based project structure. Rather than treating community engagement as a short-term design project, PLAN 640 connected student work to ongoing university-community partnerships and feasible implementation strategies. For Kevin, learning to manage expectations reasonably was paramount in his approach to the project. This finding suggests that meaningful and professionally relevant service-learning is not exclusive to studio projects. In some contexts, it may be better supported in non-studio based course structures, depending on partnerships and terms of projects.

Kevin also explained that, in prior experiences, the need for engaged student work to be reciprocal rather than extractive was typically implied. However, he recalled that PLAN 640 made that explicit through course content. For Kevin, meaningfulness happened through ethical obligations on behalf of the institution (the university, in this case). Kevin carried those lessons into his future professional work, describing how he had grown to understand the ethical responsibilities of institutions partnered with communities in planning and design efforts. To Kevin, the course provided meaning through ethically conscious engagement efforts that contrasted with his previous experiences.

Together, these stories show that meaningfulness in community-engaged service-learning happens through a variety of avenues. For some students, meaning developed through personal connection and recognition of structural inequities. For others, meaningfulness developed through reciprocal relationships with communities and the validation of engaged, community-collaborative work. These examples show that meaningfulness helps students connect community-engaged coursework to professional identity, ethical awareness, and long-term career direction.

Applied Learning

Applied learning emerged as a major theme across both survey and interview data, especially in students' descriptions of how the course helped them connect theory to real-world planning and practice. For planning and design students alike, bridging theory and practice often provided a first opportunity for them to apply concepts from their graduate education to a real-world context before entering a professional role.

Earlier research has consistently identified applied learning as one major benefit of service-learning. For example, Markus et al. (1993) found that students in service-learning courses reported a significantly greater ability to apply course content to other settings than students in traditional learning formats. More broadly, service-learning scholarship often treats applied learning as part of a larger category of experiential learning benefits (Cushing et al., 2013; Harris & Irazába, 2012). Scholars also argue that applied learning has overall positive effects on student learning outcomes (Jach & Trolan, 2023). Altogether, this body of literature demonstrates that applied learning is

49 Kevin K. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 10 December 2025.

a widely recognized benefit of service-learning and an essential factor in interpreting student experiences in PLAN 640.

Additionally, applied learning is valued pedagogically in planning education, but it is also explicit in accreditation requirements. The Planning Accreditation Board's 2022 Accreditation Standards and Criteria require accredited programs to provide students with engagement in the profession, including community-based activities and project experiences that prepare them for practice. Because of this, applied learning is important as planning programs are expected to help students connect disciplinary and theoretical knowledge to professional practice. PLAN 640 adheres to these expectations through a non-studio based format combining theory, discussion, and project work.

Throughout the PLAN 640 course, students complete readings and engage in in-class discussions on topics relating to the service-learning project, such as urban design foundations or social dimensions of community revitalization. Since the readings and discussion topics are tailored to the semester project, students are exposed to relevant concepts before applying them to community-engaged work. This sequence is especially important to this chapter's broader argument: that non-studio based coursework can still create meaningful theory-to-practice learning by integrating conceptual knowledge and project application throughout the semester. One important caveat to this is that students did not always experience the course sequence evenly. Many students across interviews described the course structure and sequence as effective in helping them apply theory to practice. For some students, they expressed that sustained or more frequent engagement would have benefitted their learning. For example, Saul's thoughts on the engagement component of the course convey this in detail:

"I feel like we could have had a few more opportunities, especially as a team...I think as a class, we engaged with the community quite a few times, but it would have been interesting to get feedback team by team more." -Saul H.⁵⁰

Saul's reflection is useful because it shows that students did not simply want more engagement for its own sake. Rather, they saw continued and more targeted interaction as a way to strengthen both the meaningfulness of the project and the quality of their applied learning. However, several students (including Saul) also acknowledged that the course schedule and sequencing made sense, given that the course happens across one semester.

Even so, some students recalled the pacing as a potential challenge, particularly in regard to the final production of deliverables. Brianna described this as a challenge, stating:

"If I remember properly, it was a slow start. I think that's because we were waiting on a lot of things to actually introduce us to the project, like the field trip and the survey and things like that. So, we spent a lot of time on precedents, concepts, and site planning. Then when it came to the final product, I think we were rushing to get it done by the deadline. When we presented, we were done by the beginning of November, and the semester doesn't end until the end of December." -Brianna S.⁵¹

While Brianna did not explicitly state that this was a negative experience, she framed the pacing as a potential area for improvement. Her thoughts on the overall structure of the course were positive, but creating more time for deliverable production, she felt, would result in higher-quality final project work. While Brianna's experience with the sequencing of the course was also identified across interviews, students were clear that the overall structure of the course was efficient for facilitating

50 Saul H. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 26 August 2025.

51 Brianna S. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 28 August 2025.

applied learning.

Interview data aligns strongly with this claim. Several students described PLAN 640 as one of the first opportunities they had to move beyond learning about planning and begin engaging in planning work more directly. Bryan R., a transportation planner, explained that while the course did not shape his professional identity in a major way, the applied nature of the project structure was impactful early on in his education:

"I think that sometimes it feels like this was really the first true planning class we took where it wasn't just learning about planning and reading out of a textbook and learning about different authors within the planning world and stuff like that. While all of that is important and interesting, I think that this one was really the first, I guess you could say, "true" planning class that let us be creative and kind of show off what we have learned." -Bryan R.⁵²

His narrative highlights one key finding: students valued the course because it helped them apply abstract planning knowledge to open-ended, real-world contexts. Bryan's experience demonstrates a shift from learning planning concepts in classroom settings to experiencing planning in practice.

This distinction is important because it emphasizes how students were not only using skills; they were also learning how theory becomes meaningful in project work. In this way, the course helped students reinforce their understanding of what planning theory is, but more specifically, it showed them how it operates in practice. Brianna names this dynamic explicitly, stating:

"I think it was helpful to have the theory and then go and...put it into practice immediately after... I think the class itself is really interesting, and probably one of my favorites. It's your first exposure to an actual project, rather than just theory. In the five year course plan, a lot of the class itself is actually still theory and reading and things and then incorporated as a project. And every once in a while, we would go over what we were working on, and a lot of the work was outside of the class, or [in] the design class is that's concurrent with it."⁵³ -Brianna S.⁵⁴

Her reflection of applied learning benefits extends beyond the idea of simply applying theoretical knowledge to real-world contexts. While she notes applied learning as a broader benefit, she recalls the overall structure of the course with applied learning as a specific component to be the most helpful in shaping her experience. Amongst theory-to-practice and flexible communication regarding project progress, Brianna's learning was informed by the dynamic format of the lecture-based coursework and project altogether. The application of theory implies that students comprehended foundational urban planning concepts well enough to understand their direct connection to real-world contexts, indicating that non-studio based coursework in service-learning is still an effective mechanism for synthesizing course content in project work. Where Bryan emphasizes the shift from learning about planning to engaging in planning work more directly, Brianna's account helps clarify why that shift felt effective pedagogically. Her reflection draws attention not only to theory-to-practice learning, but also to the structure of the course itself as a key part of that experience.

Brianna's narrative suggests that applied learning in PLAN640 was shaped not only by the presence of a real-world project, but by the sequencing of concepts, discussion, and project work across the semester. Sawyer's account reinforces this point from a different disciplinary perspective, showing

52 Bryan R. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 19 September 2025.

53 Brianna is referring to PLAN 510/Graphic Composition & Representation for Planners.

54 Brianna S. Interview by Author. Recorded. Conducted via Zoom, 28 August 2025.

how students outside planning also experience the course structure as an effective way to connect new concepts to practice. Sawyer P., an architecture student, described his experience similarly to Brianna:

"I think the structure of the course, at the front end of the course...we learned these concepts, and then you actually then work over the rest of the semester to continue to learn some concepts but then apply them. I think that was successful, and that learning the concepts and having a project where you apply them all in one course, and it's all fairly open ended was successful in teaching the concepts to the students...then [creating] a product that actually applied those concepts...I think that was successful."
-Sawyer P.⁵⁵

This narrative reinforces the arguments that non-studio based learning formats can still support applied learning effectively. Sawyer emphasized that conceptual learning and project application happened productively within an environment that was different from a traditional design studio. This suggests that the pedagogical value of applied learning is not solely dependent on studio learning formats.

Based on interview data, applied learning, both in the form of skill application to professional practice and the application of theoretical concepts to real-world projects, was widely regarded as a successful component of the course model. Students consistently described the opportunity to connect theoretical foundations with project work as a defining feature of the PLAN 640 course experience. These recollections support the argument that non-studio based service-learning formats can effectively facilitate applied learning outcomes often noted as benefits of studio learning models. While studio-based courses are often viewed as the dominant learning format for applied education in planning and design, the experiences described by interviewees indicate that non-studio based formats can also provide meaningful opportunities to synthesize course concepts in real-world contexts. Most importantly, this section challenges the assumption that applied learning is primarily an outcome of the studio learning format. Students across design fields with limited exposure to planning theory prior to the course described applying new concepts to their project work. Collectively, these stories suggest that non-studio based service-learning supports comprehension of planning concepts while also letting students apply these teachings in real-world situations.

Chapter Synthesis

Together, the findings in this chapter show that the value of the PLAN640 course extended beyond technical skill development alone. Students described the work as meaningful in different ways: through personal value alignment, professional validation, reciprocity with community partners, and a growing awareness of ethical responsibility in community-engaged practice. At the same time, they consistently emphasized the importance of applied learning, particularly the opportunity to connect theoretical concepts to real-world planning and design contexts before entering professional roles.

Considered together, these experiences suggest the meaningfulness and applied learning were mutually reinforcing rather than separate outcomes. The course did not simply help students build skills, but also helped many of them clarify their professional goals, understand the responsibilities of community-facing work, and experience planning and design as relational practices rather than abstract disciplinary knowledge. In this sense, the chapter supports a broader argument that non-

studio based interdisciplinary service-learning formats can foster forms of professional preparation often associated more strongly with studio environments, while also creating space for reflection, discussion, and identity formation.

Chapter 05.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Conclusions & Recommendations

This thesis set out to answer the question: **What is the impact of non-studio based service-learning on the professional preparedness of planning students?** Together, the findings suggest that non-studio based service-learning can contribute meaningfully to professional preparedness in planning education, and it can produce benefits often associated with studio-based learning formats. Across the survey and interview data I collected, former students described noticeable improvements in professional role clarification, interdisciplinary collaboration, communication skills, finding meaning and purpose in their work, and their ability to connect theory to practice. These findings indicate that studio-based learning models are not the only pedagogical models through which planning students can develop professional skills. More specifically, this thesis shows that professional preparedness in planning can be developed through a course model that combines discussion-based learning, interdisciplinary collaboration, community engagement, and project-based application in a non-studio setting.

In specific aspects, the non-studio based model studied in this thesis appears to offer very distinct pedagogical advantages. According to student accounts, they were required to articulate their disciplinary roles in interdisciplinary teams, connect seminar learning to project work, and communicate with neighborhood residents and stakeholders. Across interviews, I found that these were the fundamental ways in which students recalled professional preparation that lasted beyond the course project. Rather than simply replicating studio learning in another form, the course produced its own mode of professional preparation by making reflection, discussion, role articulation, and ethical engagement central to the learning process.

Contributions to Planning Pedagogy

The broader contributions of this thesis are the findings that emerged through consistent patterns in students' experiences. Beyond simply expressing positive experiences in this course, students described the format and sequence of the course and project as beneficial toward their preparation. Consistently through interviews, I found that what made the course effective was not the absence of studio. Instead, it was the ways in which the course format integrated discussion, real-world applications, collaboration, and community engagement in one larger project.

This is directly relevant to planning pedagogy because studio-based learning is often dominant in literature-especially across empirical studies. However, the findings of this thesis research suggest that non-studio based service-learning is capable of fostering professional role clarification, interdisciplinary collaboration, ethical and social justice awareness, skill development, and meaningful work. Students learned firsthand what planning contributes to collaborative and client-facing projects, translating theory to practice in ways that were visible to academic peers and to others. This finding is especially valuable for understanding how professional preparedness unfolds in programs that do not rely primarily on design studio-based learning formats. It is also valuable for planning programs housed outside design schools, where non-studio formats may be more common, but where educators still seek rigorous practice-relevant, community-engaged pedagogies.

Key Benefits of the Non-Studio Based Model

One major contribution of the course was professional role clarification. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, students used the course to better understand both their own roles and strengths as well as those of other disciplines. For some planning students, this also strengthened their sense of professional identity. The assigned interdisciplinary groups required them to describe their own roles and responsibilities to peers across disciplines, and once more in community-engaged settings. This

matters because planning practice requires the development of technical skills, facilitation across fields, and understanding one's position in broader project scopes. A common theme I discovered, especially amongst planning students, was that the non-studio based structure of the course made professional roles clearer largely because students found it to be reflective of practice in retrospect.

A second major contribution was the development of skills that were directly applicable to professional practice. Students described this process of skill development through the act of responding to real-world project demands and by learning from their peers in group work environments. As Chapter 3 revealed, students explicitly named communication, collaboration, adaptive thinking and problem-solving, and technical skills as collective areas of growth throughout their course experience. These findings are important because they demonstrate that professional skill development in urban planning education is not limited to technical skills alone. Rather, there are many other skills beyond software capabilities that PLAN 640 students named as vital components of professional development. They also attributed a wide range of these skills to future employability and overall professional preparation.

A third major contribution was the relationship between meaningfulness and applied learning. Although students did not always name these themes in the same terms, their stories about memorable experiences and formative moments showed that these two outcomes were closely connected. Often, they experienced the work as meaningful because it allowed them to apply planning concepts in community-accountable contexts, which improved their understanding of professional responsibility and ethical obligations. This finding emphasizes that professional preparedness extends beyond acquiring skills, demonstrating why planning work and the communities it serves matters. Nearly all of the students I interviewed described multiple moments where the fulfillment they received from the project or special moments in the course supported a strong sense of professional purpose. In this sense, the course helped students understand not only how planning work is done, but why that work matters.

Key Challenges and Limitations of the Non-Studio Based Model

The challenges I uncovered across interviews do not undermine the value of the non-studio based learning model, especially when looking at the overall satisfaction of those who completed the course (Figure 11). However, they do indicate that the potential benefits are not automatic for all students. One recurring issue was a lack of clarity surrounding project roles, and unequal contributions within interdisciplinary teams. While interdisciplinary learning and working across disciplinary boundaries was a common theme, sometimes students simultaneously described frustration when project workload, motivation, or communication was inconsistent or unbalanced. Some students expressed overall satisfaction with their group and the project experience, but they also recalled some moments of frustration or ambiguity as they learned to work together. This indicates that interdisciplinary work is valuable in planning pedagogical models, but more explicit direction regarding roles and expectations may help students facilitate productive collaboration earlier on in their project processes.

Another challenge discussed amongst students was the pace of the course in regard to specific project components. Some students felt that the early part of the project, or the build-up to the site visit and engagement workshops, moved slowly while later stages of the project got compressed. This finding points to a possible structural weakness in applied non-studio based coursework, especially in programs that rely on these types of educational formats instead of studio environments. Because real-world, community-engaged projects are dependent on the schedules of external partners, site visits and feedback opportunities may feel uneven in relation to the semester

or academic year. Therefore, effective pedagogy in planning education requires deliberate structure and timing so students can make consistent progress throughout various project phases.

A further challenge included the limits of community engagement within a single semester term. While engagement was exceptionally valuable across both survey and interview indicators, multiple students expressed a desire for more frequent opportunities for community input. However, many of these students also noted that the frequency of engagement made sense for the semester timeframe. Instead, they often expressed interest in a course that bridged two semesters to allow more time for engagement and project development. This is consistent with common service-learning challenges such as contingency on time, community partner capacity, and project structure. This challenge also leads me to conclude that engagement must be very intentionally structured and supported to let students gain the most from the opportunity. Taken together, these challenges suggest that the effectiveness of non-studio based service-learning depends not only on course content, but also on how intentionally the structure, pacing, and collaboration expectations of the course are designed.

Recommendations for Future Course Iterations

Based on all the aforementioned findings, my first recommendation is to establish very clear interdisciplinary expectations much earlier in the project process. Since some students experienced uncertainty about roles and expectations, future non-studio based learning would benefit from explicit discussion of how responsibilities amongst groups should be distributed. Additionally, collaborative expectations should be outlined and revisited throughout the course as the project unfolds. This recommendation follows directly from the recurring tension students described between benefits of interdisciplinary learning and the frustrations that arose when roles remained vague or unevenly distributed.

Second, the course would benefit from additional checkpoints and slightly more rigid scaffolding throughout the semester. Students described the project as moving slowly through the first half of the semester, then accelerating rapidly toward the end along with the production of final deliverables. More structured benchmarks and consistent advising along the way could help balance the pace of the course. Additional feedback sessions, project reviews, or smaller deliverable check-ins might also help students with accountability and consistent progress to reduce the end of the semester pile-up. Ideally, this would also help create room in the course schedule for more extensive final presentation revision prior to the open house. Because students often identified pacing as a structural challenge rather than a flaw in the project itself, this type of scaffolding would strengthen the course without changing its fundamental pedagogical model.

Next, future course iterations should create more opportunities for sustained engagement as well as individual team interactions with community partners whenever feasible. Students often connected the strongest learning moments and long-lasting educational outcomes to direct interaction with community partners, so the desire for more sustained engagement is a result of one of the course's greatest strengths. More specific opportunities for feedback or one-on-one interaction, continuous interactions, or a longer project timeline in general could help students integrate community input more meaningfully. In some situations, a two-semester (or full academic year) project, or greater continuity between related courses, would help students feel as though they have adequate time to achieve major project goals. This recommendation is especially important because community engagement was not only one of the most valued aspects of the course, but also one of the main sources of meaningfulness, ethical awareness, and applied learning.

Finally, instructors should consider how to maintain greater consistency in core learning outcomes

amongst various iterations of the course given that students work with a different community each year. For example, specific partner communities and particular projects might place a stronger emphasis on specific topics (such as brownfield redevelopment, supplementary readings, or assignments). This may be necessary when core course themes are less clear in a semester-long project. If this fundamental consistency is possible, instructors can simultaneously preserve the flexibility of partner communities while also ensuring that primary pedagogical goals are met. This would help future iterations retain the responsiveness that makes service-learning valuable while also protecting the core learning outcomes that define the course within the planning curriculum.

General Recommendations for Educators

While survey and interview data provide valuable insight into possible pedagogical and structural changes of the PLAN 640 course, there are further implications of these findings for general planning education. Given that this course integrates multiple academic disciplines, students begin the course at various stages of their education, possessing different skills and technical capabilities. In terms of broader planning pedagogy contributions, this research provides useful insights that educators seeking to facilitate a non-studio based service-learning course can utilize. Therefore, general recommendations for educators pursuing non-studio based service-learning coursework in planning education include:

- Explicit guidelines for all coursework and detailed clarification of expectations: both within groups, amongst community partners, and from faculty to students regarding project deliverables. This way, confusion or ambiguity surrounding final project outcomes or assessment and expectations for community impact is managed before the project begins. Additionally, establishing expectations with community partners maintains trust between the university and the community.
- Regular progress check-ins and project benchmarks in class sessions. By setting multiple internal deadlines and consistently checking in with students, project progress and assessment is understood by each project group.
- Ensure that the course schedule allots adequate time for the production of final deliverables. Educators should ideally try to schedule partner meetings, feedback sessions, and internal check-ins that allow students to make changes to their work prior to the final presentation or project deadline.
- Whenever feasible, facilitate sustained engagement with partner communities. This can translate into multiple engagement activities over the course of the semester with follow-up efforts once the course concludes, or simply a longer project term. Overall, engagement should establish a long-term working relationship with partner communities that extends beyond the time limitations of service-learning coursework.
- Following the establishment of expectations and community priorities, ensure that pedagogical concepts covered in the course align with those goals. Pedagogical adjustments should be made to convey necessary conceptual knowledge to students depending on overall project goals.
- In developing an urban design service-learning project in non-studio based contexts, ensure that students enter the course with prerequisites or corequisites that equip them with the skills needed to undertake the project work.

More broadly, these recommendations suggest that non-studio based service-learning is most effective when it is intentionally designed rather than treated as a less intensive alternative to studio

pedagogy. The findings of this thesis indicate that such courses require careful alignment between course structure, community engagement, interdisciplinary collaboration, and curricular preparation.

Conclusion

This thesis contributes to planning pedagogy by showing that non-studio based service-learning prepares students for professional practice in meaningful and impactful ways. Across students' experiences, professional preparedness was developed not only through technical and collaborative skill development as expected, but also through clearer project role understanding, stronger applied learning, and deeper awareness of the ethical dimensions of planning work. While studio-based service-learning remains an important mode of planning and design education, the findings I uncovered in this research suggest that non-studio based service-learning should also be considered as a valuable and credible pathway for professional preparation. Rather than serving as a secondary option to studio pedagogy, non-studio based planning pedagogy has demonstrably unique benefits as I explored in my research. This learning format offers a distinct learning model through which students explore interdisciplinary, community-engaged, collaborative, and practice-relevant realities of planning professions. In that sense, this thesis argues not only for the legitimacy of non-studio based service-learning in planning education, but also for its pedagogical value as a model that can cultivate reflective, collaborative, and community-accountable future planners.

Appendix A: Survey Questions

Promoting Brownfield Redevelopment through University-Community Partnerships in Critical Service-Learning Project: Survey

Consent to Participate in Research

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experience in the PLAN 640 Urban Design and Development course at Kansas State University. The goal of this study is to better understand how service-learning projects focused on brownfield redevelopment support student learning, skill development, and professional preparation.

Participation in this survey is voluntary. The survey will take approximately 10–15 minutes. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer or exit the survey at any time without penalty. Your responses will be recorded anonymously and will only be used for research and course improvement purposes.

To verify eligibility, you will be asked to provide your full name. This information will only be used to confirm that you were enrolled in the course and will not be linked to your survey responses.

Potential Risks:

There are minimal risks associated with this study. Some questions may cause minor discomfort when reflecting on past academic or project experiences. You are free to skip any question or stop participation at any time.

Confidentiality:

All data will be securely stored in a password-protected Dropbox folder accessible only to the research team. No identifying information will be included in any reports or publications.

Future Use of Data:

The subject's information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Contacts for Questions:

If you have any questions about this research, please contact: Dr. Susmita Rishi, Kansas State University, srishi@ksu.edu.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact:

Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, Kansas State University, 203 Fairchild Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224, rubin@ksu.edu; or Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, Kansas State University, (785) 532-3224, comply@ksu.edu.

By clicking "Next," you are confirming that:

- You are **18 years of age or older**
- You have **read this information**
- You **voluntarily agree** to participate in this survey

[Next screen/question]: Please enter your full name:

(This will only be used to confirm your participation in the course and will not be linked to your survey answers.)

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey!

This survey asks about your experiences in the PLAN 640 course and its service-learning project focused on brownfield redevelopment. We are particularly interested in how this experience shaped your learning, collaboration skills, and professional preparation.

Please answer the questions as honestly and completely as possible. You may skip any question. At the end of the survey, you will see a brief thank-you message acknowledging your participation.

About You & Your Project Experience

What year did you participate in Urban Design Course and its service-learning project?

(Dropdown menu with available years & project names and locations)

What discipline were you enrolled in when you took the course?

(Dropdown menu with options Architecture, Interior Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Real Estate and Community Development, Regional & Community Planning, other)-

Which disciplines were represented in your project team? (Select all that apply and indicate the number of students from each discipline)

1.1 Architecture [Number]

1.2 Interior Architecture [Number]

1.3 Landscape Architecture [Number]

1.4 Real Estate and Community Development [Number]

1.5 Regional & Community Planning [Number]

1.6 Other [Number]

What is your current position?

(Dropdown menu with choices of student, graduate working in a field related to my major, graduate working in a field unrelated to my major, in transition/looking for job.)

Overall Experience with the Service-Learning Project

How would you rate your overall experience with this service-learning project?

(1 = Poor, 5 = Excellent)

Compared to traditional classroom projects, how likely are you to prefer service-learning projects in the future?

(1 = Not likely, 5 = Very likely)

This project was engaging and helped me understand the value of community-based service-learning

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Learning and Skill Development

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

This project increased my understanding of brownfield redevelopment and its challenges.

I learned about the environmental, economic, and social factors involved in redeveloping brownfield sites.

Working on a brownfield redevelopment project improved my ability to think critically about urban planning, built environment, and sustainable development.

I feel confident that I can apply what I learned about brownfield redevelopment to future academic or professional work.

This project helped prepare me for real-world professional practice in urban design, planning, or related fields.

Multi-Disciplinary Teamwork in Brownfield Redevelopment

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

I found working with students from different disciplines to be beneficial to my learning.

The multi-disciplinary nature of this project helped me understand different perspectives on brownfield redevelopment.

Collaborating with students from other disciplines improved the final project outcome.

Working in a multi-disciplinary team was challenging.

This project helped me develop teamwork and collaboration skills useful for my future career.

Community Engagement & Field Experience in Brownfield Redevelopment

Engaging with the community (e.g., speaking with residents, visiting project sites) improved my understanding of brownfield redevelopment challenges and opportunities.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

I had enough opportunities to interact with community members and receive their input on the brownfield site.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

The involvement of community members was valuable to the success of the project.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

More direct feedback from community members would have improved the project.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

I plan to use community engagement strategies in future brownfield redevelopment, urban design, or landscape architecture projects.

(1 = Not likely, 5 = Very likely)

Benefits & Challenges of Using Brownfield Redevelopment in Service Learning

Brownfield redevelopment is an effective way to apply urban design concepts in real-world settings.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

The project helped me understand the complexity of redeveloping contaminated sites.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

The biggest challenge in working on a brownfield redevelopment project was:

- Understanding the environmental regulations
 - Navigating the community's concerns
 - Working in a multi-disciplinary team
 - Finding viable redevelopment solutions
 - Other (please specify)
-

Professional Preparation and Future Practice

I prefer the service-learning model over traditional classroom projects for relevant learning experiences.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

This project introduced me to a unique learning model I hadn't experienced before.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

I plan to use service-learning methods in future academic or professional projects.

(1 = Not likely, 10 = Very likely)

The university-community partnership was productive for this project.

(1 = Strongly disagree, 5 = Strongly agree)

Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience in the course or the service-learning project?

(Open-ended response box)

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Promoting Brownfield Redevelopment through University-Community Partnerships in Critical Service-Learning Project

1. Introduction

Thank you again for your willingness to participate in this study. You have already completed the online survey about your experience in the PLAN 640 Urban Design and Development course, and this follow-up interview is designed to explore your reflections in more depth.

This research project aims to better understand how community-engaged, service-learning projects—especially those focused on brownfield redevelopment—shape student learning, skill development, and professional preparedness. Your insights will help us improve future versions of the course and contribute to research on planning and design education.

This interview is **semi-structured**, meaning the interviewer may ask questions in a different order, rephrase them for clarity, or ask follow-up questions based on your responses. You are encouraged to share your honest thoughts, and you may choose not to answer any question or stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Your responses will remain confidential and, if quoted, will be anonymized unless you have given explicit permission otherwise.

In this project, service-learning refers to a model where students apply classroom knowledge to real-world community-based design projects.

I. Background and Context

Can you briefly describe the year and the service-learning project you worked on during the Urban Design and Development course?

What was your academic discipline at the time, and what disciplines were represented in your group?

What is your current academic or professional status?

II. Experience with the Service-Learning Model

How would you describe your overall experience in this course?

How did the service-learning aspect of the course—working with a real community and site—differ from other academic projects you've completed?

How would you describe how engaging and meaningful the project was for you?

Follow-up: What specific moments or activities were most meaningful to you?

Were there any moments you felt disconnected or unclear about your role in the project?

III. Learning & Skill Development

What specific skills do you feel you developed through this course (e.g., communication, analysis,

collaboration)?

How did this project deepen your understanding of the environmental, social, or regulatory dimensions of brownfield redevelopment?

Follow-up: Can you share an example?

How did the interdisciplinary nature of the team shape your learning?

IV. Multi-Disciplinary Teamwork in Brownfield Redevelopment

What was it like working in a team composed of students from different disciplines?

Follow-up (if needed): Can you give an example of a moment when different disciplinary perspectives contributed to your team's thinking or outcomes?

How did you and your team navigate differences in communication styles, design approaches, or problem-solving methods?

Follow-up: Did your team encounter any challenges in working across disciplines? If so, how did you approach them?

Did you feel your own discipline was valued and understood by others in your group?

Follow-up: Were there any moments when you learned something unexpected about another field?

How did the interdisciplinary nature of the team shape the final design or project outcome?

Follow-up: Do you think the project would have been different if your team had been more homogenous?

Did this experience change the way you think about collaboration across disciplines in planning or design practice?

Follow-up: Has it influenced your interest in working on interdisciplinary teams in the future?

In what ways did this experience help you develop collaboration or teamwork skills you think you'll use professionally?

V. Community Engagement & Field Experience in Brownfield Redevelopment

Can you describe your experience interacting with the community during the course project?

Follow-up: What kinds of activities or events did you participate in (e.g., meetings, site visits, feedback sessions)?

Follow-up: How did these interactions shape your understanding of the site or the project?

How would you describe the role of community input in shaping your design or planning proposal?

Follow-up: Were there any examples where community feedback led you to rethink your ideas?

Did you feel like your team had enough opportunities to engage with the community? Why or why not?

Follow-up: What might have made the engagement process more meaningful or effective?

How did it feel to present your work to community members?

Follow-up: What kind of feedback did you receive, and how did it affect your team's final proposal or your personal takeaways?

In what ways did working directly with a community affect your understanding of brownfield redevelopment or urban design in practice?

Follow-up: How did it differ from working on a hypothetical or classroom-based project?

Do you see yourself incorporating community engagement strategies into your future academic or professional work? Why or why not?

Follow-up: Has this experience changed your thinking about the role of designers or planners in working with communities?

Looking back, what did you find most surprising or impactful about working with a real community?

VI. Course Design & Structure

How would you describe the overall structure of the course—from the introduction of the project to the final presentation?

Follow-up: Were there moments when the timing felt rushed or too spread out?

Follow-up: Did the course build gradually toward your final work, or did it feel segmented?

What kinds of support or guidance did you receive from faculty during the project?

Follow-up: Were there moments where you wished for more direction, resources, or feedback?

Follow-up: How would you describe the role your instructor(s) played in supporting your team's progress?

How helpful were check-ins, desk critiques, or review sessions in shaping your team's progress?

Follow-up: Did you find that feedback was incorporated meaningfully, or did it feel more performative?

How did the final presentation or open house contribute to your learning or professional development?

Follow-up: What was that experience like for you—rewarding, nerve-wracking, validating?

Were the course goals and expectations clear from the beginning?

Follow-up: Were there any parts of the project you didn't understand until later in the semester?

Looking back, what elements of the course structure most helped you succeed?

Follow-up: Are there any structural or instructional changes you would recommend for future iterations of the course?

VII. Professional Preparation & Future Applications

In what ways do you think this course prepared you for future professional or academic work?

Follow-up: Were there specific skills, insights, or experiences you've already applied in internships, jobs, or studios?

How did working on a real-world project with a community shape your understanding of professional roles in planning or design?

Follow-up: Did it challenge or reinforce anything you had previously believed about what planners or designers do?

Has this course changed your interest in working on community-based projects? Why or why not?

Would you actively seek out similar opportunities in the future?

Did this experience help you better understand your own disciplinary strengths and how they contribute to collaborative projects?

Follow-up: Did it shape how you think about your professional identity or role within interdisciplinary teams?

Would you recommend this type of service-learning experience to other students in your program or field?

Follow-up: What would you tell them to expect—or to prepare for—based on your experience?

If you could design your own professional development experience building on this course, what would it look like?

Follow-up: What kind of projects, roles, or learning formats would you include?

Closing Reflection: Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience with this course or the project?

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