

# Twenty Steps to Prepare for and Seek a Planning Internship

A Guide for Students in the Department of Urban and Regional Planning  
Cal Poly Pomona

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This guide provides twenty steps to help you secure a planning internship, drawing on my experience in mentoring young planners who are seeking internships. My career experience includes public agency, consulting, and non-profit positions in community and economic development, strategic planning and organizational development, and grants procurement and management.

The economic consequences of COVID-19 mean that paid internships may be rarer than ever. The following provides a game plan for these difficult times. It is intended to supplement advice you should get from the [CPP Career Center](#), APSA and GPSA events, your faculty advisor, services provided by ENV Career Specialist [Alie Ivie](#), and Professor Willson's APA blog series, [Launching Your Planning Career: A Guide for Idealists](#).

Don't underestimate the steps and effort required to apply for an internship. Twenty steps are a lot, but they are proposed with the view it is more effective to apply for a small number of positions well than taking a scattershot approach of applying to many jobs without much preparation. The steps do not need to be undertaken sequentially and some may need to be repeated to obtain clarification and refinement. Here they are:

## 1. **Take a personality test and reflect on how it might shape your strategy.**

Use an online free personality test such as <https://www.16personalities.com/free-personality-test>. It might confirm things you've noticed about your work preferences and tendencies and provide some ideas about abilities that you would like to develop further. Look at the test as an opportunity to reflect rather than a definitive statement about who you are.

Consider how your personality type may inform the type of planning work and work culture that is best suited to you now. Regarding type of work, some personality types thrive in analytic work while others do so in community engagement. Regarding work culture, some personality types prosper with structure and predictability while others prize spontaneity and flexibility.

Another reason to use a personality test is so that you can present the "real you" in applications and interviews. Employers may be seeking to add a particular "type" to the team, whether that be a person inclined to brainstorm, conduct community outreach or write reports.

**2. Draft a resume that presents an accurate picture of who you are so an employer can determine if your personality is a fit for their organization culture and if your skills will be of value to their team.**

Create a resume showing your 3-4 core competency areas at the top. The competencies should integrate your skills and some of your key personality traits. For example, if you have experience coordinating events and you are reliable and hardworking, you could use the heading, *Results-Oriented Event Coordinator*, and then summarize your skills and experience in this area. The resume format should include sections on experience, community service, professional development, education, and interests, if all of these are applicable. Make sure that you state *your* key accomplishments, not those of your team or department, use proper titles for organizations and positions, and include accurate dates and other information. This type of resume is designed to communicate your skill set and justify the claims in the body of your resume. Your cover letter will state how you can apply your skills for the particular job, among other things.

The resume drafting process will give you a realistic picture of your current skills and indicate what actions, based on your skill or knowledge gaps, you need to take to realize the vision for yourself in the next 3-5 years. Share the draft resume with professors, mentors, and people who care about you and know you well. Ask them what skills and personality traits you have that are not reflected in the draft, and which ones have been understated or overstated. Consider red flags in your history such as periods of unemployment, job dismissals, failure to complete a degree, criminal record, etc. and how you plan to address them in the cover letter and/or interview. Seek guidance on how to address any serious issues.

**3. Choose a planning content area or specialization to focus your search efforts.**

Identify a planning content area you are interested in exploring through an internship. This exercise will focus your search. Consult resources listed in the APA Career Center and read planner profiles to learn about the wide range of careers in planning. Visit:

<https://www.planning.org/plannerprofile/>

Undertake a rigorous process that exposes you to the diverse actors in your community, city, and region who make plans or policies, implement plans, projects, programs, advocate for change, and lead, educate, and provide funds for programs, services, and technology.

Planning is a very diverse field, so be bold and explore as many topics as you can. Some of these are listed below:

- Affordable housing
- Art & culture planning
- Big data and app development
- Climate change and resiliency planning
- Campus planning
- Community development

- Community facilitation and engagement
- Criminal and restorative justice planning
- Environmental review
- Equity planning, anti-racist initiatives
- Food systems
- GIS and spatial analysis
- Healthy communities
- Historic preservation
- Housing (transit-oriented development, infill, family housing, etc.)
- International planning and development
- Natural resource planning, conservation, and restoration
- Placemaking
- Public planning and development approval processes
- Public policy addressing a wide range of issues
- Recreation and parks planning
- Rural development
- Sustainable economic development (including the green economy, economic gardening, and workforce development)
- Transportation and accessibility
- Urban design
- Research, surveying, and statistics

The job subject focus is not the only factor that you may want to consider. Within each subject focus there are many types of work, from plan-making to implementation. The matrix on the next page shows broad subject matter options, taking a step back from the previous detailed list, and indicating examples of different types of work within each option.

Table 1. Substantive Areas by Type of Planning Work

Substantive Area	Plans and Policies	Implementation - programs/documents	Administration of implementation	Monitoring
Land use and design	Vision statement, General Plan, specific plan, subdivision	Zoning, design guidelines, complete streets requirements	Approve development proposals, process variance requests	Regional indicators, land use mix, land utilization, job/housing balance
Transportation	Regional Transportation Plan, Mobility Element, Vision Zero, CIP program	Capital works program, STIP, bikeshare program	Bike lane implementation, VMT assessment in environmental review	Federal modeling procedures audit, post occupancy studies, crash incidence
Community development: housing, public health, social services, food systems, economic development, etc.	Revitalization plan/policy; economic development vision, racial and social justice plans	Small business programs, affordable housing requirements, community policing	Direct implementation or entitlement process, e.g., loan programs, inclusionary zoning,	Community indicators, housing element reports, community oversight
Environment	Climate action plan; multi-species conservation plan, habitat restoration plan	Solar panel program; habitat corridor design; sea level rise adaptation strategy	CEQA review, green electricity purchase, acquisition of habitat	EIR mitigation monitoring; GHG reduction
Real estate, corporate strategy, technology development	Strategic plan, development plans, demographics	Project management of development process, corporate social responsibility	Entitlements, community relations, “greening” programs	Compliance reporting, big data

#### 4. Confirm your content choice through research.

Read about trends and hot topics from public policy think tanks, professional associations, nonprofit organizations, and scholarly websites on urban planning and its related sub-disciplines. Check out local, regional, state, national and international outlets to gain different perspectives and identify current and emerging trends. Figure out what areas you are curious about and what you want to learn. Talk to faculty, alumni, and other professionals about your choices, and take advantage of APA and other professional organization mentoring programs.

Be discerning in identifying the bias of these information sources to understand their implicit theories of change, human behavior, and economics. See **URP Planning Resources Websites** document to get started. This document provides brief descriptions lifted from

website sources and includes content platforms, public policy think-tanks and research organizations, professional membership associations, nonprofits, and foundations of interest to planners. These listings are not exhaustive but provide an overview of the wide diversity of the planning field and its role at international, national, state, and local levels and reflect progressive, conservative, and nonpartisan theories and practices.

**5. Confirm your desired planning focus by creating a narrative explaining your choice.**

Write a 2-minute narrative or “elevator pitch” that communicates why you are interested in a particular area of planning and the value you would bring to an organization doing this work. Is the narrative compelling and authentic? If not, start again and dig deeper. Perhaps your original planning field choice is not right for you or you didn’t know about all the choices available in this field. Recall early memories, or later “aha” moments, that led you to choose to study planning in college or grad school.

Include several questions in the pitch engage the person you are talking with and to obtain referrals or specific information for internships. Here’s an outline to help you craft a persuasive, and memorable pitch. <https://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/elevator-pitch.htm> Practice your elevator pitch with friends and relatives. Reflect on how various audiences respond and revise the pitch as appropriate.

**6. Conduct an environmental scan to identify exemplary organizations performing work in your desired specialization area.**

Prepare a matrix to organize information about *exemplary* organizations locally, nationally, or internationally, that are doing the kind of planning work in which you are interested. Conduct online research about each organization and populate the matrix with concise information about its history, mission, programs, core expertise, theory of change, distinguishing characteristics, evaluation tools, impact (results), leadership, annual budget, strategic partners, and external validations/awards, etc. If the organization is a nonprofit, identify major funders, note if its annual financial reports are online and review them, including its Charity Navigator rating, if available. Read staff bios and identify staffing positions that appeal to you now or in 3-5 years.

**7. Develop an outline for a 3-5-year career action plan.**

Set realistic goals and objectives that are specific and measurable. Create a career path for your ideal job in the next 5 years, knowing that you may have to be flexible and make ongoing adjustments.

Review your core competency resume and elevator pitch to determine if the selected planning area makes sense right now given your education and background. *Redo Step 6 if you reject your first planning content area and select another one and revise your narrative (Step 5), if necessary.* In doing the plan, consider questions such as the following:

- What kind of work do you want to do – research and analysis, GIS, community engagement and events, technical assistance, advocacy, writing (grant proposals, publications, e-newsletters, website and social media content), long-range plan development, design review, etc.?
- What are your objectives (specific and measurable levels of achievement) from an internship?
- Are you adaptable to work independently or be part of a team?
- What opportunities and challenges are you looking for and would a start-up, adolescent or mature organization be the best place to gain this experience?
- What sector – public, private or nonprofit -- do you want to explore?
- What is the core expertise that you want to learn about and develop?
- Are you more interested in an organization that is about personal empowerment or social change?
- What do you need from your supervisor to perform at your best?

**8. Educate yourself about opportunities through a process of asset mapping.**

Figure out the geographic area that is convenient for you based on commute time and transportation access and focus your search in select communities or cities. Assume that the pandemic will end soon, and that you will be commuting to a workplace.

Become knowledgeable about the communities within the geographic boundaries of your search area and consider the roles that nonprofits, public agencies, consulting firms, private organizations and foundations play in this field. For public agencies, remember that many types of planning employment outside the traditional local government role may be of interest: Federal, state, regional, county, and special purpose districts. Even within local government, look beyond the planning or community development department. For consulting firms, check out APA award winners and word-of-mouth to determine exemplary firms. Similarly, for developers, see which ones win awards from ULI or non-profit housing organizations.

Create a matrix of local organizations that do the kind of planning work you are interested in using headings in the matrix discussed in Step 6. The following provides example questions you might address if interested in working in the non-profit sector.

- Consult city and county government and United Way websites for lists or directories of community organizations.
- Research organizations that local foundations have funded in the past and consult with local library staff for referrals.
- Cast a wide net and seek referrals from friends, colleagues and family members to find out which organizations have visibility or solid reputations.
- Identify URP alumni in organizations of interest and reach out to them for informational interviews (URP faculty can help you identify them).
- Are websites outdated or lack important information indicating they are under-resourced?
- What are the backgrounds of Board members and staff?

- Does the organization measure its results so that community impact can be determined?
- What are the organization's perceived strategic partners, allies, and competitors indicate about its position in the community and its reach?

Your research should help you determine which organizations have clear missions; stated goals, objectives, and results; core capabilities, programs which are monitored and evaluated, strong leadership and accountability, transparent financial information, and communications are informative and professionally written.

## 9. **Prepare a cover letter to a selected organization requesting an internship.**

If there is an internship description available, read it thoroughly to confirm that you meet the minimum qualifications. Sometimes you may need to explain how non-planning experience should be considered as providing essential planning skills. In the case that there is no job description, identify proposed projects and programs that interest you. The letter should communicate your understanding of the mission of the organization and the key job responsibilities, state why you desire to work there, and the value you can bring to the project team or organization. Be specific about how many hours you can work and for what time period (at least 6 months part-time), what knowledge you hope to gain, and the level of professional supervision you require.

Figure out if you can work for free as an investment in your future. If not, determine the minimum hourly stipend you require. You may be interested in a policy position, for example, but can't find an internship that pays. This requires a decision about whether to volunteer or pursue paid work outside your intended work target. Since many employers have suspended their internships for college students during the pandemic and public agencies usually hire only interns who are enrolled students, there are likely to be few paid and formal internships available if you wait until you have completed the program. Each application submittal requires a fresh cover letter that relates directly to the organization and job and your connection to their work. Expect to send out 25 to 50 applications or letters of inquiry.

## 10. **Prepare for the interview.**

If invited for an interview, take the interview seriously. Use the interview process as a learning tool and be ready to share how you prepared for it and send a thank you note afterwards.

Here are some suggestions on how to prepare for the interview:

- Review the organization's website in depth by reading reports, newsletters, and announcements.
- If you are interviewing with a public agency, conduct an online search to read agendas and staff reports to obtain status and historical information on projects, funding sources, issues, community support and opposition, etc.

- Tour the community and review online media coverage.
- Write a memo summarizing the background of the project or create a fact sheet.
- Look up department leadership and identify staff who are CPP graduates.
- Be prepared to identify training opportunities to acquire a specific skill required to be valuable to the organization.
- Develop a list of potential interview questions and write out your answers.
- Practice out loud until you master the information.
- Prepare a statement to introduce yourself based on your elevator pitch and practice delivering it aloud.
- Generate several thoughtful questions to ask at the end of the interview and demonstrate you are informed. For instance, is there new leadership?
- Dress professionally for the interview and make sure your space is clear of clutter and that the background lighting is appropriate.

**11. Consider seeking a grant to provide an internship stipend for a nonprofit or other organization of your choice.**

Research local service clubs and local foundations and find out their areas of interest and identify nonprofits that are doing work in these areas. Think creatively. For example, consider working for an animal welfare non-profit or one working to end homelessness. In this case, propose a project to advocate for homeless rights by championing pet ownership for homeless people such as pet-friendly public policies.

Research how to write a grant and prepare a proposal with realistic assumptions, tasks, and deliverables. Interview representatives of local nonprofits to pitch your idea and discuss a placement. Share your draft grant proposal and refine it to meet their needs or revise the proposal for a special project of interest to the nonprofit that has stalled or unfunded. Then approach a service club or local family foundation with a letter of proposal along with a letter from the nonprofit stating it agrees to place you in an internship should funds be available for a stipend for a part-time internship for 20 weeks. Specify the minimum stipend amount you need.

Should the internship not materialize, this effort will give you experience developing and pitching a grant proposal, the opportunity to introduce yourself to representatives of one or more nonprofits in case job opportunities arise in the near future (networking), and insight as to whether business development is something you enjoy, indicating that private consulting is a viable career path for you.

**12. Maintain an internship application log.**

Record information about your application process that includes dates of submittals, interviews, and disposition action. Make sure you file a copy of the job announcement, cover letter, resume, and writing samples you submitted in case you are invited for an interview. If you don't get hired, reach out for feedback on your application and interview performance. Ask about professional organizations they recommend or specific training you need.



**13. Seek support and guidance from a mentor as your repeat steps to refine your materials.**

Cultivate mentors who can advise you in this process. You may find them among the faculty, through APA programs, outreach to URP alumni, in your local city, or outside planning. Think broadly and be resourceful. Reach out to professionals to conduct informational interviews. Recruit a mentor and show up for regular meet ups. Write thank you notes when people help you.

**14. Consider a remote student internship.** Research organizations with causes that interest you and search online job sites for opportunities. <https://www.virtualinternships.com/>

**15. Consider volunteering for a legislator or nonprofit public interest organization.**

Research placements where you can acquire new or enhance skills such as navigating government regulations and programs for constituent services, conducting research on proposed public policies, drafting talking points for elected officials, using social media platforms to organize support for issues and campaigns, organizing expert panels for events and educational workshops, advocating for pets for homeless people, or securing governments funding for active transportation projects.

**16. Monitor job sites to see which employers are hiring and for what type of positions.**

Reach out to employers who are hiring and propose an internship on specific projects identified on recent job descriptions or media reports. Experiment with keywords to see how to search for jobs you may be interested in. See document, **URP List of Job Sites**.

**17. Consider webinars and training courses.**

Choose webinars and training courses in the planning specialization that would add value to your resume now and prepare you for an internship in the content area of your choice. There are many free webinars being offered during the pandemic. You can also brush up on computer skills and take advanced foreign language classes or learn something new. Check out the offerings through CPP's resources such as Lynda.com from LinkedIn.

Look for scholarship opportunities to students to attend conferences and workshops sponsored by professional associations or seek discounted registration in return for volunteering at the conference.

**18. Network with targeted professionals and groups that can help you realize your career goals and volunteer for their initiatives.**

Be selective and evaluate the opportunity in terms of your career plan. Make a six-month commitment. Volunteer to serve on a committee to have the opportunity to meet other professionals in a small group setting and time to complete a project or program for the

organization. Join a young professionals group such as those sponsored by the [LA](#), [Orange](#), and [Inland Empire](#) APA sections.

19. **Nourish yourself with self-care.** Take regular breaks, eat healthy, exercise daily, listen to music, get enough sleep, and spend time in nature. Learn from, but try not to dwell on rejection. It is a tough market, and hiring decisions are based on a variety of tangible and intangible factors. This guide should help you prepare for as many factors as possible—the factors you control and your choices about where to apply. Other factors, from employer bias to legitimate but undocumented qualities employers seek, are outside your control. If you do not get invited to the next round of interviews or offered a position, learn from the experience and move on.
  
20. **Persevere.** You can do this!! The world needs planners more than ever.

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