

Alumni Profile

Anne Taufen, PhD Social Ecology 2007 (Advised by faculty in Urban Planning and Public Policy)



Career

Please provide a brief overview of your career path since graduating from UCI.

In 2008 I began a tenure-track job in Urban Studies at the University of Washington, Tacoma. I became an Associate Professor in 2015, and currently chair the graduate program in Community Planning.

What made you get into the career that you are in?

Working on my dissertation made me realize how much I loved research; until then I had been unsure about whether I saw myself as an academic. I knew that I liked teaching, and I enjoy working in new areas of urban development and institutional growth. I was very fortunate that the program I joined enabled me to

implement and build new degrees, on a relatively new campus, and that the people around me are intellectually ambitious.

What do you see yourself doing in five or ten years?

One of the best things about academic research is the ability to engage with a new area and develop new skills and expertise every five or ten years, and one of the best things about teaching a lot is that it requires creativity, practical experimentation, and the ability to interpret and translate for non-expert audiences. I see myself building on both of these capacities over the next decade. I see myself conducting public scholarship and community-engaged research that is increasingly effective at working with partners, training students, and producing useful and new knowledge.

How do you hope to make a difference?

I'm interested in translation. I hope to train students to see new things in the world around them, and in themselves; and to begin to develop the direction for their own lives and contributions. I also hope to frame and conduct my research in a way that translates critical social science – specifically, concerns with unequal power relations in

organizational life, and uneven development in urban spatial planning – for more broad-based legibility and recognition, and practical action.

Your Time at UCI

When did you attend UCI?

2001-2007

What program were you in?

PhD in Social Ecology

Why did you choose to come to UCI?

Interdisciplinary program. Interesting faculty. Good funding.

Reflections

What made you decide to pursue a graduate degree?

I became very interested in the more theoretical ideas behind planning and management while I was doing my master's degree, which had a very professional focus. A professor I admired encouraged me to think about a PhD, which meant a lot to me. I wasn't sure academia would be the right fit for me, but I always wanted to write, and I knew that studying more would sharpen my focus for the things I was interested in: urban development, public spaces, policy and politics.

What is your most memorable moment/experience at UCI?

Joining a reading group that Martha Feldman convened, that included a small group of doctoral students in planning, political science, sociology. This was a clear shift from more professionally oriented ten-week classes, to a more intentional community of emerging scholars. It was energizing and profoundly influential; more challenging, engaging, and provoking than anything prior, and also the first time that I felt an authentic sense of belonging at UCI.

Was there one thing or one person at UCI that really helped or made a difference in your graduate/postdoctoral career? If so, tell us about whomever or what it was?

Many people helped and inspired me at different moments, and consistently over time. Helen Ingram supported and advocated for me in a variety of ways that were invaluable as I navigated the edges of disciplines, took a leave of absence, became a parent. Looking back I would say – and I tell my own students – that developing strong relationships and true affection and respect among grad school colleagues has been extremely important to me. These relationships were not only sustaining and fun in

Irvine, many have persisted and strengthened over the years. Early career can be bumpy, and having people to reach out to and debrief, to reconnect with at conferences, to share drafts and vent and ask advice and compare notes – I had no idea how important my Irvine colleagues would be to me, years after I left campus.

Did you do any research while at UCI and what was it?

Yes – my work at UCI, some of which I continue now, was focused on urban river redevelopment. I did some shorter, unfunded projects with Raul Lejano on environmental justice and discourse analysis, then worked on a funded project for my dissertation, a comparative case study of urban “watershed parks” in four Western US cities with flood-prone rivers.

How would you explain your research to your grandparent? How would you help someone understand the importance/significance of this research?

Building infrastructure and public spaces for the cities we have now, rather than the cities we thought we’d have a century ago, when technology and culture and environmental conditions and population were very different.

What has impressed you most about the subject matter that you chose for your research/degree while at UCI?

It has continued to interest and engage me, and I have been able to deepen my questions and extend the research and analysis over the course of a decade.

Alumni Life

What are you currently up to?

I live in the Puget Sound metro, I just finished a year co-directing Livable City Year, a annual partnership between the University of Washington and a different city or jurisdiction, which was a great experience, challenging and fascinating. My children are 12 and 7, as they get older it becomes more important to me that they see and understand what I do, and we are in the midst of a move closer to my campus so that we have more time with each other.

How did your education at UCI benefit you in your current life?

The example of working somewhere that was a work-in-progress, in academic terms – a relatively new campus, interdisciplinary and growing programs, leadership and commitment to institution-building by generations of faculty – this made a big impression on me, and prepared me for the reality that building something new can be messy.

What book or podcast would you suggest to someone who is just getting started with their graduate career at UCI? (Examples – *Podcast: Happier with Gretchen Rubin*; *Book: Who Moved my Cheese*)

This is less direct self-help or life coaching, but I recommend On Being, with Krista Tippett for general reflection, wonder, challenge, getting out of one's head. She interviews different civic leaders, scholars, writers, and activists, in episodes that are generally under an hour. Thinking about values is a great way to orient one's career.

What book or podcast would you suggest to someone who has just graduated and is transitioning to the working world? (Examples – *The First 90 Days*)

For scholars and academics I recommend The Scholar's Survival Manual, by Martin Krieger and for women in particular I recommend Ms Mentor's Impeccable Advice for Women in Academia, by Emily Toth.

What advice do you have for a new graduate student?

Show up, do your work, be courteous and collegial with your classmates and your professors – this maybe goes without saying, but it's really important. Beyond that, I would say pay attention to the things that really interest and compel you, and listen to that pull. Research can be hard and frustrating, and you should really like the content and questions. Working on a subject that moves and interests you will help with lots of other challenges that are sure to come up.

What advice would you give to a current graduate student as they look towards their future careers?

Try to stay open to possibilities. The job I took was one I almost didn't apply for: I was sending applications across three different disciplines, time and resources were tight, and at some point I made the arbitrary decision that I wasn't going to apply anywhere else without a PhD program. My thinking was something like: I'm going into academia to do research, research requires PhD students, so I should eliminate places without PhD programs. Not unreasonable, except that the big R1s where I interviewed didn't "get" or seem all that interested in my interdisciplinary ideas, and when I went to visit the non-PhD campus where I was eventually hired: I loved it. The uncertainty of being on the job market can be awful, and exhausting, but enlisting conventional wisdom to manage and escape that discomfort isn't always be the best thing to do.

And if you start an academic career: Don't create any additional hurdles for yourself. I saddled myself with a 40-mile commute and a fixer-upper house as I was still getting my career underway – not wise. There are things we have to do (teach, publish, serve, in academia) – things we choose to do (teach a lot, have kids, engage with local communities, in my case) – and things that will sap and undermine our ability to do any of the foregoing with any consistency or joy, if we're not careful (Don't commute if you don't have to. Don't renovate a house if you don't love mess. Etc)

What was your biggest obstacle transitioning from life of a graduate student to your career?

I became more deeply aware of gendered dynamics and how slowly suffocating they can be. I had two children pre-tenure, and willingly took on a very heavy teaching load and approach to community engagement. There just are not enough hours in the day. I am frequently angry that I live in a society that has trained me to care-take far more effectively than any graduate program could ever train me to build a research career – and it is tempting (and accurate, even justified) to remain mad at the state, our institutions, myself – which becomes its own obstacle. I had to learn to prune, prioritize, and get on with it. Feeling overwhelmed is a logical and reasonable early career experience that can easily lead to self-sabotage, e.g. switching paths altogether as a form of self-preservation. I am grateful that the post-2008 recession made this less feasible for me, and that as an athlete I can be stubborn as hell. I love what I do. The obstacles for me were getting clear on goals and staying in the game.

What is the most unexpected life lesson that you gained from your time at UCI?

There were a lot of norms that were embedded in my understanding of myself, of place, of my relationships to other people that were challenged and expanded by my time at UCI. My understanding of cities and urbanism changed, in a polycentric, post WW II metropolis; my understanding of my own whiteness and privilege began to take root, on a campus where people of color are the majority and in a region where immigrants clearly fuel the culture and the economy; my politics changed in a less-familiar, post-9/11 world, aided by the time and space to read, reflect, and encounter new ideas and experiences. The people who took time with me – over meals, on projects, in nature, in their homes, in their offices and classrooms - enabled me to grow. This is something I strive to remember, in my life today.

What are your hobbies/passions outside of your work/research?

Rowing, especially single sculling or a really good double. I love to spend time on or near the water. I had to take a break pre-tenure but have started up again in the last couple years. Reading, and more recently knitting, which is pleasantly tactile and gratifying. A friend and I started a women's book-and-knitting group about eight years ago – "knook" – and it's a great non-academic respite.

How do you balance work/life?

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What person inspires you?

Lots of people inspire me, but fundamentally I have to say my mother, Mary Anne Glennon. The oldest of five kids, she was the first person in her family to get a bachelors degree. She went on to study law at Georgetown University, at a time when very few women practiced, and definitely not in the working class town in New Jersey where she grew up. She was the eleventh woman accepted to the bar in Delaware,

where I was born – and she looked out for her younger siblings after both of her parents died young, and she was starting her own family. I don't think she had anywhere near the career she might have liked, although she was valued and successful everywhere she ever worked and eventually became a partner at a small firm in Pennsylvania. What inspires me about my mother is her toughness and persistence; she owned her choices and created better ones for many others.

Is there a typical 'down' weekend for you—how do you relax?

Family.