



Making a Difference on Main Street

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Professor Sweta Byahut's Sustainable Transportation Planning class was awarded the 2017 Distinguished Leadership Award from the American Planning Association—Alabama Chapter for their class project, "Prattville Parking and Pedestrian Management Plan." The class, although officially under the Master of Community Planning Program in the Department of Political Science, drew in 18 students from a variety of disciplines. The students were split into teams and tasked with developing

Students in the **Master of Community Planning** program receive a practice-based education and develop expertise in a number of areas including sustainability, land use, geographic information systems (GIS), community design, real estate development, revitalization, and economic development.

a pedestrian and parking management plan for historic downtown Prattville, AL.

Byahut, associate professor of community planning, worked with Prattville city officials to plan this project. To gain further insight on what students were able to accomplish through this project, we sat down with Byahut for an interview.

"Every year we partner with a city to work on a class project," Byahut says. "It benefits both—the students get to work with the city and meet with the city planner or planning director, and the city

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gets students to work on a project that they’re interested in. Projects like this also give students the opportunity to go out of their niche major and then explore their interests. Students and I have a great time every year with the project, which ever study it might be.”

At the beginning of the semester, students traveled to Prattville to meet with and receive a tour from the director of planning and development for the city, Joel Duke. Duke also joined the class again toward the end of the semester for a brainstorming session with the students where they were able to ask questions and receive feedback before their final presentations.

“This is really great for the students because before they finalize their report and final proposals, they are able to bounce off their conceptual ideas and plan with the city officials,” says Byahut.

Phoenix Robinson, a master’s student in the community planning program, believes her involvement with the project helped her see transportation from a new perspective.

“Our work has expanded my understanding that all forms of transportation, even walking, have to be taken into account when planning to transform the cityscapes in which we interact,” says Robinson.

As one of only two community planning programs in the

state, many of the graduates find jobs immediately and go on to serve as city planners all over Alabama and beyond.

“Considering that Auburn’s mission as a land-grant university is to improve communities, I think the planning program fits in right here,” Byahut says. “We are all about outreach, enhancing the quality of life here, and creating professional planners who can go out serving the state and the Southeast region.”

Byahut believes the master’s program affirms the College of Liberal Arts’ dedication to promoting progress in local communities.

“It is definitely progress, I think, to consider alternatives that can improve the quality of life without actually going to the standard ‘more parking, more roads, more this...’ kind of attitude. I think that we’ve moved beyond that.”

The class, and the program as a whole, continues to exceed expectations since its move to the College of Liberal Arts two years ago. Projects from Auburn’s program have been nominated three times in the past five years for the leadership award and all three have won.

Byahut and her students were recognized for their achievement in October 2017 at the Alabama Chapter of the American Planning Association (ALAPA) Conference in Birmingham, AL.



Byahut and her students often talked about Auburn’s cityscape in class. Auburn’s downtown area is currently undergoing a revitalization of its own, and is expected to be completed by 2030. For more information on the project, visit www.auburnalabama.org/downtown.