2020 Michael J. Krasner Memorial Scholarship Application Essay
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To the Scholarship Committee:

Although Western New York is not my original home, over the past six years, it has become so and will likely remain my home for years to come. My exposure to Western New York started during my undergraduate experience at the SUNY College of Technology at Alfred State where I completed a Bachelor of Architecture degree. Through this experience I gained valuable design thinking skills which I now apply to my work in the planning program at the University at Buffalo as well as an appreciation for the Southern Tier region.

My interests in planning issues significant to Western New York are quite broad, and are adjusting in the wake of the pandemic we are experiencing now. The overarching theme that encompasses my many more specific planning interests is sustainability, without which no plan can be successful. Fundamentally, sustainability is the ability of a system to automatically replenish itself. While in architecture school I learned about environmental sustainability at the building level, but since I started studying planning, I have expanded my understanding of sustainability to also include economic, and social sustainability and to apply this wholistic vision of sustainability at the neighborhood, city, and regional scales. Addressing unsustainable systems in planning such as reliance on fossil fuels for transportation, powering and heating homes and businesses; auto-dependency; suburban sprawl; and destruction of agricultural land are all important to me as well as the success of our region. It is my view that as planners interested in sustaining our communities for centuries to come, we must convince residents and local leaders that our economy is a subsystem of our environment. That fundamental understanding is a prerequisite to internalizing the costs of inputs taken from the environment and waste released back into it. In addition to the master of urban planning, I am also pursuing the advanced graduate certificate in sustainability to learn more about how that concept can, and is, being applied locally in Western New York.
The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has also shaped my interests in planning. Planning for density in ways that are healthy, economically efficient, and socially accepted will be critical in the next decade. There has always been overlap with planning and public health, but going forward planning can not happen effectively without incorporating public health into every decision which has led me to apply for our dual MUP + MPH program. Not only am I interested in planning to reduce the spread of communicative diseases, such as Covid-19, I am also interested in planning to reduce non-communicative diseases, such as obesity and heart disease, for improved health outcomes. The combination of these two schools of thought — urban planning and public health — will allow me to both individual health behavior decisions and the systemic forces that influence or limit health related options to a population. This correlates to a passion for walking and active transportation infrastructure — making waking and biking for everyday tasks the easy and enjoyable choice. Through working from home for a month, I have learned how important it is to incorporate walking into my daily routine, for both physical and mental health. This is a lesson that I am interested in teaching throughout my planning career.

I have not held a planning position yet, although I hope to use the knowledge and skills that I have gained from my graduate school experience to have a lasting, positive impact on the people and place where I choose to work. Planners are well positioned to be both leaders and listeners. I cannot fix the structural economic and political systems that have created the many problems found in Western New York, but I can listen to the people experiencing injustices caused by them and observe the data supporting those stories. Then, I hope to have the leadership capacity to act on what I heard and saw. An example is that there are people in Buffalo who cannot afford to heat their homes or even think about having the financial means, or control, to make their living space more energy efficient, therefore reducing utility costs. As a planner, I can advocate for more frequent inspections of rental property to ensure safe living conditions, to suggest that communities adopt the 2020 NYStretch energy code to make buildings more efficient, and work to expand the capacity of workforce training programs, such as those at the
Northland Workforce Training Center, to help address economic opportunities for residents. Having the mindset for holistically sustainable development from the start is essential to impacting whichever Western New York Community I work with.

I do not know yet exactly where I will be working in Western New York after graduation, but I am confident with my educational experience and local connections, I will find my place here. This semester, I had the great fortune to take Laura Quebral's Economic Development course. Through her lectures, lectures from guest speakers, and an ongoing conversation with her throughout the semester, I became very interested in working with the UB Regional Institute team and may have an internship opportunity this summer or possibly in the fall. I reached out to Laura because I was concerned that planning wasn't going to get me involved in implementation enough. She showed me that the work they do is just as much about getting out into the community and engaging with stakeholders as it is researching, and producing reports.

My interest in economic sustainability and implementation of planning practices has also led me to pursue an interest in real estate so that I can actively participate in shaping the built environment with good planning policies.

Buffalo truly is the best planned city in the world, and there is no other place that I would rather have as my urban laboratory or my home for the foreseeable future. The relationships I have made in Western New York with friends, teachers, and mentors are infinitely valuable to me. Based on my experience, I wholeheartedly understand why Buffalo is the “City of Good Neighbors.”