

Strategic Plan

Sustainable Urban Planning Program 2026–2031



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Foreword and Executive Summary

This strategic plan (2026–2031) for the Sustainable Urban Planning (SUP) Program builds upon prior plans, accreditation reports, and lessons learned during the COVID-19 pandemic. It acknowledges the headwinds facing higher education—demographic shifts, declining enrollments, reduced public investment, and increasing scrutiny of graduate education costs—while emphasizing the program's commitment to resilience, innovation, and impact.

Key priorities include strengthening curricular innovation with a focus on climate change, equity, and technology (including GIS and AI); enhancing student success and career readiness; deepening alumni and professional partnerships; and ensuring resilience through efficient use of resources and creative collaborations. At the same time, SUP remains committed to its core values of justice, sustainability, and applied knowledge.

Despite resource constraints—operating with one full-time faculty member, reliance on adjunct instructors, and limited investment—the program leverages its practitioner faculty, DC location, and professional networks to maximize impact. Partnerships with employers, government, and nonprofit organizations provide critical opportunities for students, while alumni engagement strengthens career pathways.

Evaluation and assessment are central to this plan. SUP will use a continuous improvement cycle (Plan → Do → Evaluate → Adjust) to monitor progress, validate outcomes, and ensure alignment with the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) standards. By building on its history, responding to emerging trends, and aligning with the mission of the College of Professional Studies, SUP positions itself to prepare the next generation of planners to lead just, resilient, and sustainable cities.

Introduction

The Sustainable Urban Planning (SUP) Program at the George Washington University prepares the next generation of planners to confront the challenges of climate change, equity, and resilience in cities and regions around the world. As a professional master's program housed in the College of Professional Studies, SUP integrates theory and practice, equipping students with the applied skills and critical perspectives necessary for leadership in the planning field.

This strategic plan (2026–2031) builds on a decade of program innovation, community engagement, and accreditation experience. It provides a roadmap for advancing student success, strengthening curriculum and assessment, and deepening professional partnerships. The plan also situates SUP within broader institutional and societal contexts, ensuring alignment with the mission and values of the College of Professional Studies while addressing the realities of higher education and the planning profession today.

The following sections trace the program's history, accreditation commitments, and lessons learned, before articulating the strategies and priorities that will guide SUP through 2031.

Program Identity: The Four-Pillar Approach

SUP distinguishes itself through a four-pillar framework that grounds all curricular and co-curricular activities:

- **People:** Human-centered planning that prioritizes community voice and lived experience
- **Environment:** Climate adaptation, resilience, and ecological sustainability as foundational concerns
- **Prosperity:** Economic development that creates shared opportunity and reduces inequality
- **Equity:** Justice-oriented practice that addresses systemic disparities in planning processes and outcomes

This framework extends the traditional triple bottom line by foregrounding equity as a distinct and essential pillar, not merely a component of social sustainability.

Competitive Advantages

SUP operates a distinctive model among PAB-accredited programs:

- **Washington, D.C. Location:** Unparalleled access to federal agencies, national nonprofits, international organizations, and policy networks

- **Practitioner Faculty:** All instructors work actively in the field, bringing current practice, professional networks, and real-world projects into the classroom
- **Climate Focus:** Curriculum centers climate adaptation, resilience, and environmental justice—high-demand competencies in today's planning market
- **Small Cohorts:** Personalized attention, strong peer relationships, and faculty who know every student by name
- **Student-Centered Faculty:** Adjunct instructors teach because they are passionate about mentoring the next generation—not for compensation or tenure pressure

History and Accreditation Commitments

The Sustainable Urban Planning Program has consistently demonstrated responsiveness to accreditation feedback and to the evolving landscape of higher education.

2018 Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) Site Visit Report: The review team highlighted the program's strengths, including its mission-driven orientation, location in Washington, D.C., and strong adjunct faculty base. At the same time, the report identified vulnerabilities: reliance on a single full-time faculty member, curricular instability due to adjunct turnover, and the need for a more systematic approach to student learning assessment. The report called for clearer governance structures, deeper integration of adjunct faculty, and improved mechanisms for evaluating outcomes.

2019 Strategic Plan: In response, the program set a forward-looking agenda grounded in innovation, equity, and ecocentrism. Emphasizing the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental sustainability, the plan sought to strengthen program identity, expand faculty capacity, enhance global engagement, and reinforce governance structures.

2021 PAB Progress Report: The program documented meaningful progress. Key steps included the introduction of a Capstone Showcase and assessment rubric to systematically evaluate student learning, enhanced advising and mentoring systems to support retention, improved diversity monitoring and recruitment practices, and the piloting of new strategies to stabilize enrollment.

Bridging 2019 → COVID → 2026 Plan

The 2026–2031 Strategic Plan honors the commitments made in the past while adapting them to new realities. Where the 2019 plan envisioned growth through additional faculty, curriculum expansion, and international engagement, the current plan emphasizes optimization under constraints. With limited resources, SUP must maximize the impact of practitioner faculty, strengthen alumni and employer partnerships, and embed high-demand skills such as GIS, AI, climate adaptation, and equity planning.

At the same time, the plan acknowledges the headwinds facing higher education: declining enrollments due to demographic shifts, reductions in federal and state support, the rising costs of graduate education, and growing skepticism about its return on investment. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed inequities, tested resilience, and accelerated the demand for flexible and accessible learning models. SUP has emerged from this period

with renewed clarity about the need for adaptability, responsiveness, and student-centered support.

By weaving together past commitments, present challenges, and future opportunities, this strategic plan positions SUP to remain relevant, resilient, and impactful—preparing graduates to lead in shaping sustainable, equitable, and livable communities.

Constraints and Risks

Transparency about constraints is essential for realistic planning and appropriate expectation-setting with accreditors, administration, and stakeholders. This section documents the structural limitations within which SUP operates and the risks these pose to plan implementation.

Structural Constraints

Single Full-Time Faculty Member: The Program Director serves as the sole full-time faculty, responsible for all administrative functions, accreditation compliance, curriculum oversight, student advising, assessment, partnership development, and strategic planning. This concentration of responsibilities creates vulnerability and limits capacity for new initiatives.

No Dedicated Administrative Support: Unlike peer programs with program coordinators or administrative assistants, SUP operates without dedicated staff support. All scheduling, communications, event logistics, data management, and reporting fall to the Program Director.

Adjunct-Dependent Instruction: While practitioner faculty bring valuable expertise, adjunct availability could be unpredictable, onboarding requires ongoing investment, and coordination is time-intensive.

Limited Direct Budget: CPS provides minimal discretionary funding for program development, student support, or faculty development beyond base instructional costs.

Risk Assessment

Risk	Likelihood	Mitigation Strategy
Program Director departure or extended leave	Medium	Governance Handbook documents processes; cultivate adjunct leaders
Key adjunct faculty unavailability	Medium	Maintain roster of backup instructors; cross-train on courses
Enrollment decline below sustainability threshold	Medium	Strengthen recruitment; diversify student pipeline; employer partnerships
Partnership fatigue (overcommitment)	Medium-High	Tiered commitment system; realistic annual targets; quality over quantity
Assessment/accreditation non-compliance	Low	Embedded assessment cycle; Capstone Scorecard; CPS alignment

What This Plan Cannot Accomplish Without Additional Resources

The following initiatives, while valuable, are not feasible under current resource constraints:

- Hiring additional full-time faculty (requires CPS budget allocation)
- Launching fully staffed certificate programs or new degree tracks
- Providing substantial student travel/conference funding without external grants
- Creating paid internship programs without employer or foundation sponsorship
- Scaling student enrollment significantly without administrative support

These limitations are documented here to support future resource advocacy and to set realistic expectations with PAB reviewers.

Strategic Alignment

The Sustainable Urban Planning (SUP) Program operates within a unique ecosystem: a professional college that values agility, access, and applied learning, and an accreditation framework that emphasizes evidence, equity, and effectiveness. Strategic alignment across these domains ensures that the program's mission is coherent, measurable, and responsive to both institutional and societal needs.

At its core, SUP aligns with the College of Professional Studies' Six Value Pillars, which serve as a shared foundation across all college programs:

- **Community:** SUP cultivates a diverse and supportive learning community that connects students, faculty, alumni, and practitioners.
- **Access and Inclusivity:** The program removes barriers to participation through flexible scheduling, hybrid learning, and professional mentoring.
- **Respect:** Faculty and students engage in mutual learning, valuing the expertise each brings from their professional and lived experiences.
- **Progress and Impact:** SUP's applied curriculum enables students to translate planning theory into measurable improvements in communities.
- **Applied Interdisciplinary Knowledge:** Each course integrates cross-sectoral knowledge, bridging planning, policy, environmental science, and technology.
- **Innovation Ecosystem:** SUP collaborates with employers, agencies, and nonprofits to co-create curricula that reflect emerging practice needs.

This alignment extends to the Planning Accreditation Board's 2022 Standards, ensuring that SUP's design and delivery meet the highest professional expectations. A detailed PAB alignment matrix is included in Appendix B.

Program Goals, Strategies, and Tasks (2026–2031)

The Sustainable Urban Planning (SUP) Program has identified five strategic goals to guide its development over the next five years. These goals translate the program's mission, stakeholder expectations, accreditation requirements, and environmental context into a focused set of priorities.

Priority Tier System

All strategies and tasks are classified into three tiers to ensure realistic implementation given resource constraints:

Tier	Definition	Resource Implication
CORE	Essential for accreditation compliance and basic program functioning	Must be accomplished with existing resources
PRIORITY	High-value activities that strengthen program quality and student outcomes	Pursued when capacity allows; may require modest CPS support
ASPIRATIONAL	Desirable initiatives contingent on external resources or institutional investment	Only pursued if grants, partnerships, or CPS funding materialize

Goal 1: Strengthen Academic Quality and Curriculum Relevance

SUP will maintain a curriculum that is academically rigorous, professionally relevant, and responsive to the evolving demands of planning practice. The curriculum will continue to integrate sustainability, equity, systems thinking, and data-informed decision-making, while expanding coverage of emerging fields such as climate resilience, geospatial analytics, and applied artificial intelligence.

Strategies and Tasks:

Tier	Task	Frequency	Timeline
CORE	Conduct comprehensive curriculum review aligned with PAB accreditation cycle	Every 3 years	2026, 2029
CORE	Align all syllabi with PAB standards and CPS value pillars (explicit on syllabus)	Ongoing	Years 1-2
CORE	Maintain and update Capstone Instructor Guide and Scorecard	Annual	Each Fall

PRIORITY	Enhance cross-curriculum consistency through sharing modules and faculty coordination	Ongoing	Years 1-3
PRIORITY	Integrate updated datasets (EPA, FEMA, DC Open Data) into course assignments	As courses run	Years 1-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Develop new course or module in AI/GIS/climate analytics	One-time	Years 2-4

Goal 2: Enhance Student Success, Support, and Professional Readiness

SUP is committed to fostering an inclusive, supportive, and professionally oriented learning environment. Recognizing that students come from diverse backgrounds—many as career changers or recent graduates working full-time—the program seeks to strengthen advising, build community, reduce access barriers, and enhance career readiness.

Strategies and Tasks:

Tier	Task	Frequency	Timeline
CORE	Launch Alumni Mentorship Network with structured matching process	Ongoing	Launch Year 1
CORE	Formalize Capstone Showcase as signature culminating event	Once per semester	End of each semester
PRIORITY	Coordinate with CPS Career Services for sector-specific programming	1 event/year	Years 1-5
PRIORITY	Work with success coach to develop Student Success Hub with advising materials and templates	One-time + maintain	Years 1-2
ASPIRATIONAL	Offer micro-credentials in partnership with ESRI, project management, etc.	As available	Years 2-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Secure funding for student conference travel micro-grants	As funded	Years 2-5

Goal 3: Expand Partnerships, Visibility, and Professional Impact

Community and professional partnerships are central to the SUP identity. The next five years will focus on deepening relationships with public agencies, nonprofit organizations, private sector partners, and alumni to broaden opportunities for student learning and enhance program visibility.

Strategies and Tasks:

Tier	Task	Frequency	Timeline
CORE	Maintain existing partnership relationships (guest lectures, internship hosts)	Ongoing	Years 1-5
PRIORITY	Establish Employer Advisory Group	1 meeting/year	Launch Year 1
PRIORITY	Develop 2 new partnerships annually (internships, projects, or guest lectures)	2/year	Years 1-5
PRIORITY	Include external practitioners in studio reviews	1-2/semester	Years 2-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Host public webinars or policy forums showcasing faculty/student/alumni work	1/year	Years 2-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Co-develop initiatives with GW centers (Public Health, Data Science, Sustainability)	As opportunity arises	Years 3-5

Goal 4: Strengthen Governance, Resource Stewardship, and Assessment

To ensure long-term sustainability and accreditation readiness, SUP must operate with clear governance structures, efficient use of limited resources, and consistent evidence-informed decision-making.

Strategies and Tasks:

Tier	Task	Frequency	Timeline
CORE	Update Program Governance and Operations Handbook	One-time	By Dec 2026
CORE	Complete annual assessment cycle (collect, analyze, report data)	Annual	Each January
CORE	Conduct rubric calibration with capstone faculty	Annual	Each Fall
PRIORITY	Convene faculty for planning/assessment discussion	1/year	Years 1-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Pursue external grants (EPA, HUD, foundations) for program enhancement	As opportunity arises	Years 2-5

Goal 5: Advance Innovation, Technology Integration, and Future-Ready Skills

Planning practice is rapidly transforming due to technological innovation, climate risk, data proliferation, and new models of community engagement. SUP will prepare students

to lead in this environment by integrating emerging tools and fostering adaptive, forward-thinking planners.

Strategies and Tasks:

Tier	Task	Frequency	Timeline
CORE	Embed planning technology tools in existing courses (GIS, data visualization)	Ongoing	Years 1-5
PRIORITY	Encourage capstones incorporating advanced analytics and visualization	Ongoing	Years 1-5
PRIORITY	Support faculty professional development in digital tools	As available	Years 1-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Pilot micro-credential or short course in Urban AI/Planning Technology	One-time pilot	Years 3-5
ASPIRATIONAL	Host Technology and Ethics in Planning speaker series	Biennial	Years 2, 4

Key Performance Indicators and Targets

The following metrics will be tracked to measure progress toward strategic goals. Baselines reflect current or recent program data; targets represent realistic aspirations given resource constraints.

Indicator	Baseline (2025)	2028 Target	2031 Target
Total enrolled students	43	45-50	50-55
Graduation rate (6-year)	TBD	≥80%	≥85%
Job placement within 1 year of graduation	100%	≥75%	≥80%
Average Capstone Scorecard rating (out of 5)	4.5	≥4.0	≥4.8
Student satisfaction with advising (survey)	TBD	≥80%	≥85%
Active alumni mentors	0	10-15	15-20
Active partnership agreements	TBD	+4-6 new	+8-10 new
Employer Advisory Group established	No	Yes	Sustained
Governance Handbook update completed	No	Yes	Updated
External grant funding secured	\$0	Any	>\$10K

Note: "TBD" indicates baselines to be established in Year 1 through systematic data collection. These will be documented in the first annual assessment report.

Implementation Plan

The successful execution of the 2026–2031 Strategic Plan requires a structured, phased, and realistic implementation approach that acknowledges both the strengths and resource limitations of the program. With only one full-time faculty member, a cadre of dedicated adjunct instructors, and a college environment marked by financial constraints, the plan emphasizes efficiency, partnership, and incremental improvement.

Implementation begins with low-cost, high-impact changes—activities such as updating syllabi, strengthening faculty communication, refining rubrics, and activating alumni mentors. These improvements require minimal new resources but yield immediate benefits in academic quality and student support. In parallel, SUP will initiate medium-term strategies such as enhancing technology integration, building community partnerships, and formalizing governance structures.

Assessment is integrated directly into the implementation process rather than treated as a separate administrative requirement. Each year, SUP will collect data on student learning, enrollment trends, course evaluations, alumni feedback, and capstone performance. This evidence will guide curricular adjustments, inform advising, and support PAB accreditation compliance.

Phased Implementation Timeline

Phase	Years	Primary Focus
Foundation	1-2	Governance Handbook update, syllabus alignment, Alumni Mentorship Network launch, Employer Advisory Group formation, baseline data collection, rubric calibration
Expansion	2-3	Partnership development, curriculum review (aligned with PAB cycle), Student Success Hub, external practitioner involvement in reviews, pilot public programming
Innovation	3-4	Technology integration, grant-seeking, aspirational initiatives as resources allow cross-GW collaboration exploration
Consolidation	4-5	Maintain and refine existing initiatives, second curriculum review cycle, assess KPI progress, document lessons learned, prepare for next strategic plan

The consolidation phase (Years 4-5) is intentionally designed to avoid initiative fatigue. Rather than launching new programs, this phase focuses on sustaining what works, refining based on assessment data, and building institutional memory for the next planning cycle.

Appendix A: Annual Action Calendar

This calendar summarizes recurring activities by semester to support planning and workload management.

Fall Semester

- Update Capstone Instructor Guide and Scorecard
- Conduct rubric calibration session with capstone faculty
- Launch/refresh Alumni Mentorship Network matching
- Convene Employer Advisory Group (Year 1+)
- Coordinate with CPS Career Services on spring programming
- Host Capstone Showcase

Spring Semester

- Host Capstone Showcase
- Complete annual assessment data collection and reporting
- Convene faculty planning/assessment discussion
- Career Services event (workshop or networking)
- Review and update partnership agreements

Every Three Years (Aligned with PAB Cycle)

- Comprehensive curriculum review (2026, 2029)
- Update strategic plan metrics and targets
- Prepare PAB progress report or self-study materials

Appendix B: PAB Standards Alignment Matrix

This matrix summarizes how SUP meets Planning Accreditation Board (2022 Amended) Standards.

PAB Standard	SUP Evidence	Verification
1: Program Purpose	Mission focused on sustainability, equity, resilience; four-pillar framework; aligned with CPS and GWU	Mission statement; syllabi; strategic plan
2: Governance	Transparent governance; Governance Handbook; adjunct participation; advisory input	Handbook; meeting records; faculty surveys
3: Faculty	Practitioner faculty with field experience; coordinated onboarding; shared modules	Faculty CVs; evaluations; onboarding materials
4: Curriculum	Integrates GIS, research methods, planning law, equity, community engagement, capstone	Syllabi; curriculum map; student work samples
5: Student Engagement	Capstone Showcase; alumni mentoring; advising resources; internship pipelines	Showcase records; advising logs; career outcomes
6: Resources	DC location; practitioner networks; CPS infrastructure; growing partnerships	Partnership agreements; budget documentation
7: Facilities/Tech	GW library access; ArcGIS, Adobe; virtual learning platforms	Software inventories; IT documentation
8: Diversity/Inclusion	Equity-focused curriculum; diverse faculty; accessible formats; DEI in syllabi	Demographic data: syllabi review; student surveys
9: Assessment	Annual assessment cycle; Capstone Scorecard; "closing the loop" documentation	Assessment reports; rubric data; action logs

Appendix C: Resource Needs Analysis

This appendix categorizes resource needs by feasibility to support realistic planning and resource advocacy.

Need	Feasibility	Potential Source	Impact
Adjunct onboarding materials; shared resources	GREEN	Existing capacity	Improves consistency
Alumni Mentorship Network	GREEN	Volunteer alumni	Strengthens advising
Capstone Scorecard updates	GREEN	Existing systems	Meets PAB Standard 9
Career workshops with CPS	YELLOW	CPS Career Services	Improves placement
Faculty retreat/planning session	YELLOW	CPS events budget	Enhances coordination
Software (ArcGIS credits, etc.)	YELLOW	CPS tech pool; GW licenses	Supports digital skills
Student conference travel grants	RED	External grants; philanthropy	Student competitiveness
New course development funding	RED	CPS; grants	Curriculum innovation
0.5 FTE program coordinator	RED	CPS staffing allocation	Essential for scaling
Additional full-time faculty	RED	CPS budget; external funding	Long-term sustainability

Key: GREEN = Feasible with current resources | YELLOW = Requires modest support | RED = Requires significant investment

Appendix D: Strategic Alignment Matrix

This matrix demonstrates how program learning objectives align with CPS Value Pillars and PAB Standards.

Program Objective	CPS Pillars	PAB Standards
Apply systems thinking to urban challenges	Applied Interdisciplinary Knowledge; Progress and Impact	Standard 1: Knowledge, Skills, Values
Use evidence to inform planning decisions	Applied Interdisciplinary Knowledge; Innovation Ecosystem	Standard 2: Planning Skills
Practice inclusive and equitable engagement	Community; Access and Inclusivity; Respect	Standard 3: Values and Ethics
Communicate planning ideas effectively	Progress and Impact	Standard 2: Planning Skills
Demonstrate professional ethics and leadership	Respect; Community	Standard 3: Values and Ethics
Contribute to continuous learning and professional development	Innovation Ecosystem; Applied Interdisciplinary Knowledge	Standard 9: Assessment and Outcomes