

A Conversation with Michael Damico

Adjunct Faculty Member, Kate Gleason College of Engineering

Facilitated by Luke Auburn

Luke Auburn: You're listening to the RIT Professional Development Podcast. I'm your host Luke Auburn. Today's guest is Michael Damico. He teaches as an adjunct faculty member for the Kate Gleason College of Engineering. He's a landscape architect at Stantec by day and serves as VP of External Affairs for the New York Upstate Chapter of the American Society for Landscape Architects. We'll discuss his career path and advice he has for others, thinking about their own professional developmental. Michael, thank you for joining me.

Michael Damico: Well, it's a pleasure being here.

Luke Auburn: So can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved with teaching classes as an adjunct professor at RIT?

Michael Damico: Well, I was receiving my graduate degree. I was a teacher's assistant. Always been interested in the scholastic world. You know, it's just so wonderful to see new ideas. You know, once you are in the work world, some people become jaded or just that into the rigmarole. And so, it's wonderful being around new ideas and vibrant individuals. So that attracted me to RIT. My fiancé, soon to be wife, is a graduate of the RIT graduate program. And so, between that little connections, my involvement with several civil engineers, I just got to talking with certain heads of the department, and, you know, having a master's degree helps.

Luke Auburn: Yeah, absolutely. Earlier, I mentioned your involvement with the NYUASLA professional organization, and how does your work there play a role in the professional development? How has it kind of helped you along your path?

Michael Damico: As a student, I wasn't very involved with volunteering. It wasn't until I became into the work world that I was more, much more involved with various aspects of volunteering. And this is a volunteer position. You are elected, but, you know, sitting on the board, it's all volunteer time. And I can't emphasize enough how many connections I've made just through my time volunteering and how that has opened up a number of different doors professionally.

Luke Auburn: So the real benefit is in the networking of it, in addition to the gratification of expanding your horizon.

Michael Damico: And that's, you know, something -- Going into it, you kind of understand that that is a factor or that can be a factor. Really, that wasn't my main goal. It was, okay, well, I'm, you know, very driven. You know, I want to advocate for the profession. It's almost like a little brother syndrome. And so, that was really the driving force. And then once I was established within the organization, it just opened up so many doors. And, you know, I hear the same thing with AIA and ASCE. So, you know, for the past three years, that's all I've been telling any student that I come across. It's like, well, you know, trust me. I was sitting in your position at that time. I was told the same thing and I just shrugged it off, but, you know, it really can benefit you.

Luke Auburn: So being an adjunct professor, that's a large time commitment, in addition to your regular full-time position. What is it that really attracts you to it, and how does that align with your career goals and what you ultimately want to do?

Michael Damico: Well, I mean, I would love to teach. Here in Rochester, we don't have a landscape architecture department. RIT does hire myself, as well as another landscape architect who teaches site planning in the architecture department. And it's wonderful because the profession of landscape architecture it relatively new, but it's a balance and almost a bridge between those two professions that I just mentioned, the architecture and the engineering. I've worked a majority with civil engineers in my professional career thus far. And so, I see and work with these civil engineers, especially with site planning. And it's almost as though there's something that I can bring to them that's nontraditional from the engineering aspect.

Luke Auburn: So what would you say to this point have been some of the most important steps you've taken towards advancing your career?

Michael Damico: Literally everything. It could be from -- And this is where it's slightly different. Landscape architecture, architecture, you have a design portfolio. And that's how you sell yourself. It's a visual resume. So in school, I worked hard to develop a good portfolio to get the internships. Coming out of school, I wanted to become a golf course architect, so I was able to obtain an internship with the only man that I wanted to, traveled out to Michigan, and was traveling around with him building, designing golf courses; 2008 hit. Not many people are building and designing golf courses, especially in the states. Had to hop ship, worked with his first boss, another extremely prominent golf course architect, primarily in China and Thailand, Asia, and that was enough for me with that, so I decided to head back to Rochester and get my professional license. You know, I had already obtained two pieces of paper. And so that was the next logical sequence. And in the midst of taking my test and another strong advocate of

teaching any student to continue on both with education but then your professional development of obtaining that license.

Luke Auburn: Certainly, does teaching help you keep your own skills sharp?

Michael Damico: Yes. Absolutely. You know, depending on the class, of course, but yes. It really does. And it's refreshing. As I said, just almost every aspect of it is just refreshing when you walk onto the campus really.

Luke Auburn: You mentioned a few times some of your mentors and you just talked about some of the people who have helped you through your own career. And what was it about them that you admired, and how did you get connected with that person?

Michael Damico: In school, in undergrad, it was, you know, it was a professor that just seemed to have a lot of, or I seemed to share a lot of the same ideas as they already had instilled. That helped to shape me, my outlook on the profession, also looking continuing on with education. In graduate school, it was the professor that I had TA'd with. You know, he was site manipulation, grading. These are the things that really interest me. Almost at every stage, you know, now working with professionals, especially as a, quote on quote, "millennial" now that's breaking in, and we're slowly taking over. There's two other generations that are in the workforce with us. And so, it's nice almost to have a mentor from each generation is what I've found. So I've started, you know, Stantec. Almost -- Most firms, even the smaller firms, I've been with a couple smaller firms and much larger firm, they have a lot of this established. They understand the importance of a mentor and especially for entry-level and, you know, near entry-level positions. So I can't understate the importance of a mentor. Obviously, friends, family. You know, I understand that certain situations, people don't have that fallback structure in the form of a family. Thankfully, I had that opportunity, but when I moved away, you begin to learn to lean on friends. And so, you know, you can find your mentors or assistance along the way in a variety of forms. You know, it doesn't necessarily have to be just within your profession. And that's the beauty of a campus life because you're surrounded by all of these different walks of life that you really don't encounter when you're outside of the campus. It's this melting pot all in one place.

Luke Auburn: And I liked what you said about how your organization can kind of balance and draw from mentors at each level to sort of round out the perspective.

Michael Damico: I think that that's really important. And, you know, it's this generational gap, which, you know, I'm sure has been prevalent for other generations preceding us, but, you know, we're in a very, very special time. I mean, you know, we're coming across. The generation before us, they

understood the old way of life without technology and have started to grow up with it. We're really the first generation that literally as a child you grew up with something in your hand. And then your grandparents' generation, they've seen all of this change, but, you know, they grew up without any of this stuff and literally the, quote on quote, "old school way". You can gain a lot of knowledge from each individual or each generation.

Luke Auburn: So what do you see next for your own career development? You talked about how you have your masters and now you're teaching on a management level. What comes next? Do you have any idea or are you still kind of feeling that out?

Michael Damico: Well, I'm currently working on the redesign of Main Street right here. So that's a big step, you know, that I've always wanted to do, make changes in our community. I grew up just on the Irondequoit of the city line. You know, went to high school over here at McQuaid and went down the road to Buffalo for my undergrad. So I mean, I've been all around here. I love it, and I relish the opportunity to now to finally leave my mark. And it's great because, you know, here we are, the millennials. We're starting to take over, and we're starting to leave our mark on society and, you know, our community. It's wonderful -- RIT keeps a lot of individuals here in Rochester that they never would have expected to stay in Rochester after they finished their two years. I hear that so many times. I don't know. You know, I thought I was going to be gone, but here I am 7, 8 years later, and we're still here. If we could do more of that and keep more individuals here, I think that Rochester will become that city that it once was.

Luke Auburn: That's wonderful. And it's great that you're able to now start to leave your impact on the city that you grew up in and loved.

Michael Damico: Yes.

Luke Auburn: So thank you very much for your time. It's really been a pleasure. That concludes this edition of the RIT Professional Development Podcast. For more information on how you can develop your career, visit rit.edu/cpd.