

You *Can* Get There from Here

**UAlbany master's in regional planning students and their professor
envision new ways to get around the uptown campus.**

By Carol Olechowski



Through the Purple Path planning studio, Joshua Poppel, Elena McCormick, Michael Alba, Laura Whalen and Ross Farrell (left to right) are working to beautify the uptown campus and make it more user-friendly for students, faculty, staff, neighbors – and four-footed visitors like Seneca, Whalen's dog. Here, the group gathers near the SEFCU Arena parking lot, where the first section of the path will be completed.

Route 66 and the Yellow Brick Road don't intersect on any map, of course. But the best aspects of both – practicality and wonder – will soon overlap at UAlbany along the Purple Path and the Golden Grid.

The new pathways grew out of planning studios conducted in 2005 and 2006 by Adjunct Professor Jeffrey Olson and several of his master's in regional planning (M.R.P.) students. Their creativity and vision resulted in designs for byways that will transform the uptown campus into a safer, more inviting place for pedestrians and bicyclists alike.

Olson, a faculty member in UAlbany's Department of Geography and Planning for more than a decade, grew up in Bergen County, N.J., where "all the farms and open spaces were turned into suburban sprawl by the time I graduated high school. It was a tragedy. But even then, I helped my neighbors save the last remaining piece of woods. R.O.W.D. (Residents Opposed to Wetlands

Development) set me on a career path toward making the world a better place," notes the partner with Alta Planning, a national firm specializing in "green infrastructure solutions."

Bethlehem, N.Y., native Michael Alba, Graduate Student Planning Association president and an intern with the Capital District Transportation Committee (CDTC), is interested in "the mobility needs of the disabled, elderly and children." The son of UAlbany professors of sociology Gwen Moore and Richard Alba finds that regional planning "weaves together a wide range of disciplines in the search for improving the human state."

Like Alba, Ross Farrell was born and raised in the Albany area. He left his home in Kinderhook to study for a B.A. in urban studies and sociology at the University of Pittsburgh, "but I knew I wanted a career in the Capital Region because I love it here, so getting my graduate degree at UAlbany was a logical first step." The planning studios have "helped me use my ability to understand what infrastructure and policy changes are needed to give people incentives to get out of their cars and walk, bike, or take mass transit to their destinations," says Farrell, who recently left his job in the

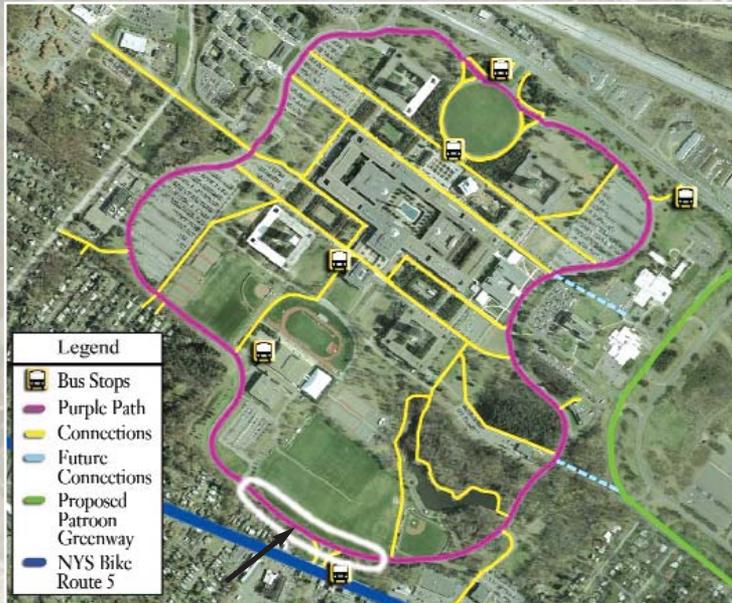
University's Office of Space Management and Campus Preservation to accept a position as senior planner with the Capital District Transportation Authority (CDTA).

The Purple Path and the Golden Grid, Olson explains, "link to the idea of making UAlbany a more sustainable, safe and enjoyable place to be. They grew out of a planning exercise in my *Bicycling, Walking and Trails: Innovations in Transportation* class – the first course of its kind in the U.S. when we started it in 1996.

I ask the students to design their own community. [The late University at Albany] President [Kermit] Hall was very supportive of creating a higher quality of life here and became a champion of the Purple Path, a proposed 5-kilometer loop trail for walking, running and bicycling along University Drive, the perimeter of the uptown campus."

The Golden Grid, meanwhile, was designed at the request of Vice President for Finance and Business Kathryn Lowery. That project, Olson says,

"identifies pedestrian and bikeway connections that complement the Purple Path, turning the spaces between the quads and the podium back into 'village greens' and transforming the dirt paths on campus into landscaped pathways."



This aerial view shows the route of the Purple Path. The area circled in white indicates the first section of the project to be completed.



University officials endorsed the students' proposal and encouraged its implementation.

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Lowery’s office, which earmarked \$5,000 in support for each planning studio, is one of a number of entities bringing the projects to life. Through the Institute for Healthy

Infrastructure (iHi), the New York State Department of Health’s Healthy Heart Program contributed another \$5,000 toward the Purple Path. The Office of Architecture, Engineering & Construction Management is coordinating improvements to a roadway near Dutch Quad and a Purple Path walkway this year, according to Engineer/Project Manager Elena McCormick. And Parking and Mass Transit Services is helping to implement the Golden Grid, which Alba describes as “the skeleton that supports the Purple Path and connects it to the podium.”

Another form of affirmation came in September 2006, when the New York Upstate Chapter of the American Planning Association presented Farrell, Alba and fellow graduate students Aaron Bustow, Dekka Michael, Xiaofeng (Iris) Ge, Valeria Ivan, Emily Richardson and Joshua Poppel an Outstanding Student Project award for the Purple Path initiative.

For Poppel, executive director of the New York Bicycling Coalition (NYBC) since 2005, participating in the Purple Path studio “really helped synthesize the advocacy work I do with the real-world implementation of planning.” In addition, “the M.R.P. program expanded my knowledge of the planning process and has enabled me to be a more effective advocate for bicycle and pedestrian initiatives.”

Graduate Student Organization President Maria Chau sees the Purple Path and Golden Grid as “team efforts” that “brought together the different aspects of the community.” A participant in the Golden Grid planning studio, she is grateful to the University’s neighbors for supporting the projects. “A lot of people in the community use the campus. In many ways, they see it as an asset; it’s a quieter place to jog, and there’s different scenery. It’s very important to think of creative ways to keep the unique characteristics that make us who we are but make UAlbany a better place,” remarks Chau, a candidate for graduation in December.

McKownville Improvement Association member Laura Whalen echoes Chau’s sentiments. The Purple Path and Golden Grid projects promote “walkability,” one of her organization’s highest priorities. “Good signage and walking paths are wonderful benefits to neighbors of the University. Walking is healthy. You can meet and greet students and your neighbors, and see the beauties of the

campus: trillium in bloom, a blue heron, the goslings that hatch in the spring, a pileated woodpecker flying overhead. When people are walking, they see things they don’t ordinarily.”

Whalen urges UAlbany to “preserve open space on the campus in order to keep our neighborhood as green as possible. I would love to see a transportation management plan that works to reduce the car traffic the University brings to our neighborhood. Getting people walking is a start.”

The planners anticipate that future projects will continue to strengthen the University’s neighborhood connections. Currently, says Olson, “we are discussing the possibility of extending these ideas into a studio project for the downtown campus.”

[To read about the Institute for Healthy Infrastructure and the Purple Path planning studio, please link to [http://www.albany.edu/~ihi/.](http://www.albany.edu/~ihi/)]



Poppel and Alba discuss the planning studio as they walk along an unpaved pathway at UAlbany.