Greening the City. Are We Bringing Foresters to the Table?

By Eric Wiseman and Susan Day

Not a week goes by without a major news story describing trends in urban population growth and their consequences for people and the environment. Urban areas are growing, and cities are seeking to minimize the environmental impacts of urbanization and create hospitable habitats for people. City managers and officials are asking themselves, “How do we do this, and which professionals will be entrusted to make it happen?” Scientists and policymakers are busy tackling the first half of that question, the second half is largely up to the professions to stake their claim.

Managing urban environments is no easy endeavor, and no single profession could or should take sole ownership. In the past, the natural-resources component of cities (think trees, soils, and other vegetation) received sporadic attention from planners, architects, and park managers. Today, cities are using increasingly complex green infrastructure systems to harness the ecosystem services provided by our urban natural resources. This degree of intertwining of natural-resource systems with the built environment requires a new and thoroughly interdisciplinary approach to management and design. With respect to green infrastructure, an array of professionals have expertise to contribute to the management of these plant-based, ecological systems: landscape architects, urban planners, horticulturists, ecologists, engineers, urban foresters, and more. Yet, as the future of cities is examined, which of these professional groups will be viewed as the subject-matter experts on managing urban forests—arguably the most significant portion of green infrastructure? It might be presumed that cities will turn to urban foresters for expertise. However, both anecdotal evidence and scientific data suggest that urban foresters are, at best, inconsistently recognized as a critical knowledge resource and may not always be hired or valued as such. This concern is not unfounded. A recent study, which investigated the opportunities provided by our urban natural resources, found that the profession is viewed and structured in ways that may or may not be adequate for devising well-informed recommendations. Therefore, we expanded the research scope to include aspects of urban-forestry employment and professional practice. This resulted in the four discrete studies of national scope summarized below.

Employment Opportunities

How do you make a career in urban forestry? Naturally, students and early-career professionals are interested in this question, but it also sheds light on how the profession is viewed and structured by employers. Thus, we had a two-fold purpose for looking at urban-forestry employment opportunities: First, we were interested in describing the opportunities in terms of qualifications, duties, salary, and sector. Second, we were interested in constructing a career ladder based on degree requirements and supervisory duties. This information has relevance to university curricula, student recruitment, and mentoring. Over an 18-month period, we gathered 151 urban-forester job postings from across the US and performed a detailed analysis of these postings. Our findings were recently published in the Journal of Forestry (doi.org/10.1093/jofore/fvx006), but we include some highlights here.

Because we used a strict definition for urban forestry in our search criteria, 62 percent of job postings were with local governments; jobs with commercial or nongovernmental organizations comprised less than 20 percent. Of the preferred degrees described in postings, just over half listed “forestry” as a preferred degree, followed by urban planning (14%) and environmental science (7%). Only a quarter of postings described this as the preferred degree category. Therefore, we expanded the research scope to include aspects of urban-forestry employment and professional practice. This resulted in the four discrete studies of national scope summarized below.

Employer Expectations

Where entry-level positions do exist, what are employers looking for in a new hire? In a separate survey, we asked government and private-sector employers about the skills they seek in new hires and whether their recent hires have met these expectations. This survey targeted a different population than the job posting analysis above, but it revealed some similar trends. By far, the most valued credential by employers was the ISA Certified Arborist. Unlike the job postings, however, a clear preference was expressed for employees with an urban-forestry degree, slightly more so than a degree in arboriculture, forestry, or horticulture. The most valued skills were a cross-section of basic technical skills (tree identification, pruning, planting, species selection) and professional skills (public relations, customer service, communication, ethics). Interestingly, although urban-forestry curricula provide students with a broad array of geospatial analytical skills and an understanding of policy, planning, and decisionmaking, employers did not identify these as most-valued skills. Employer expectations were commonly not being met by new hires in the areas of conflict resolution, employee supervision, and advanced technical skills (tree root management, risk assessment, and disorder diagnosis). All told, collegiate urban-forestry curricula appear well-aligned with the expectations employers have for urban-forestry. The self-described professional identity of respondents was the self-described professional identity of respondents: Only 33 percent identified themselves as an urban forester. In contrast, 21 percent identified themselves as a public administrator and 12 percent as an arborist. A full 34 percent of the respondents identified with an “other” professional identity.

While it’s reassuring that managing our urban forests is predominantly entrusted to arborists and urban foresters, it’s also daunting that more than half of the trustees may have limited professional preparation for the task. Although many of these situations might be small localities that hire well-qualified consultants or utilize the expertise of extension agents or state agency foresters, undoubtedly, many of our nation’s urban forests have minimal professional management. The survey also revealed that the urban-forestry workforce is not very diverse: Of the 524 respondents, 91 percent were white, 78 percent were male, and the median age was 52. Racial and gender diversity is not a new challenge for forestry and natural resources, and it appears to pervade urban forestry as well. It seems logical that urban forestry would be a sector to make inroads on racial and gender diversity, and that these be imperatives for resource professionals serving an urban clientele. Encouraging diversity is not just good for the client; it also brings a diversity of ideas and perspectives to decision making and can be inadequate for devising well-informed recommendations. Therefore, we expanded the research scope to include aspects of urban-forestry employment and professional practice. This resulted in the four discrete studies of national scope summarized below.

Employee Experiences

Who practices urban forestry and how they arrived at the occupation can be telling about how decisionmakers approach marketing and creating support mechanisms to advance the profession. We conducted a nationwide survey of individuals working in local governments whose primary responsibilities revolve around managing urban trees and green spaces. The most surprising finding was that the self-described professional identity of respondents: Only 33 percent identified themselves as an urban forester. In contrast, 21 percent identified themselves as a public administrator and 12 percent as an arborist. A full 34 percent of the respondents identified with an “other” professional identity.

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opinion was considered on urban trees or greenspace issues, and 77 percent likewise indicated that their coworkers understood what they do in their urban-forestry jobs. Similarly, 94 percent somewhat or strongly agreed they were satisfied with their career thus far, 84 percent felt there were opportunities for career advancement in the profession, and 76 percent indicated that they were well paid. What we cannot ascertain from the survey is where individuals who don’t fit the demographic profile might land with their perceptions. Are there individuals whose careers in urban forestry have faltered because of their race or gender? What are the implications for how decisionmakers market and recruit to a decidedly much more diverse college-age populace? How to ensure that underrepresented groups get the proper mentoring and early-career support they need for success? All told, the survey suggests that urban forestry is a well-regarded professional structure that will create broad career opportunities for urban-age and national partners on this. What are the workforce that is interested in jobs and and how might SAF play a bigger role in supporting urban and community forestry? SAF has had an interest in urban and community forestry for a long time, but just recently, I’ve been working with SAF’s national leadership to look at how we can add more urban and community forestry articles to the Journal of Forestry and how we can make the urban and community forestry track of the SAF National Convention more robust. I look forward to continuing that work with SAF.

What’s your favorite part of your job? Working with all of our national partners. They make me proud, proud to know that trees are getting planted and cared for every day in communities across the nation. And I like seeing the sense of accomplishment shown by the people our program serves. It might be something like a tree planting in a small community, or it might be something big, like an urban tree canopy assessment that tells the city what its actual needs are. Maybe it’s something really small, like a Saturday morning tree giveaway. But those kinds of things show me that the program is really making a difference in people’s lives.


not be interested in it as a career path.

Conclusion
The research conducted in Urban Forestry 2020 is in various stages of publication. In the meantime, resources and data summaries are available at u2020.frec.vt.edu. A set of strategic recommendations resulting from Urban Forestry 2020 is currently being vetted with our steering committee.