

Cotter Consulting would like to congratulate Assistant Project Manager Hannah Ciurej on earning her Master of Engineering in Construction Engineering and Management at the Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT) this past spring. Hannah completed her education, which she started in 2015, with the help of Cotter's tuition reimbursement program, which helps employees achieve their educational goals and develop the skill set they need to succeed in their career. Hannah shares her experience working full time while continuing her education, and how she was able to bring classroom experience to job sites.

IMPROVING LIVES BY ENHANCING ENVIRONMENTS



What program did you do and how did it work?

I completed my Master of Engineering in Construction Engineering and Management at IIT this spring, after three years of on-and-off coursework. IIT's Civil, Architectural, and Environmental Engineering (CAEE) department offers both a master's degree and a certificate program in CM, so I started out in the certificate program in 2015. That year I took four classes, during spring and summer to see if the program would be the right fit. The work I was doing in classes and at my previous employer, complemented one another. As I was wrapping up my certificate, I started interviewing with Cotter for an APM role. My combined experience and education were enough to secure me a position. Once I began the O'Hare Conrac project for Cotter in fall 2015, I took off a year to acclimate to my new role. I started back up in fall 2016 to take the remaining courses to complete my degree. IIT's graduate-level CM courses are offered almost exclusively after working hours, so it was possible for me to continue working while I pursued the degree.

Why did you decide to get this degree?

Even as a kid, I was always trying to better understand how things work, fit together, and function. So for me, it was really important to build on my architectural background and learn how construction sites operated, how buildings came together, how trades worked together to complete a job, and how good management could improve the process for everyone. IIT's CM program came highly recommended to me by a residential architect I used to draft for on occasion. After deliberating at length about pursuing a number of other avenues, such as architecture, preservation, urban planning, I landed on construction management because it suited my strengths and fit my long-term goals. IIT's program was perfectly tailored to build on what I had learned working at the architecture firm where I started my career, which was more focused on construction administration than drafting. Once I started at Cotter and saw my education and experience playing off of each other, it motivated me to continue and finish.

In what ways did getting your degree impact your work on a project, and vice-versa?

Pursuing my Master's while developing my career in CM was an amazing synergy. Doing both at once was like fitting five years of experience into two. IIT's coursework was very field-oriented, keeping us firmly rooted in the reality of what was to come after graduation. My assignments informed and supplemented my experience on site, which was instrumental in integrating theory and reality. For example, in class we received actual sets of plans and specs and had to estimate or schedule the job. We were given the backstory from claims our professors were investigating and told to analyze and present the cases. We were expected to learn the necessary software.

Being introduced to so much in the classroom gave me an edge when similar issues came up in the field, and made me more comfortable to contribute in a meaningful way. Though some of the coursework was challenging, it pushed me to develop my knowledge, confidence, and self-sufficiency in my critical thinking and decision-making skills. My greater understanding of the realities of a job site were an asset to myself and my classmates, as I was able to share real-world scenarios in class.

Beyond that, pursuing my masters and a career simultaneously made me really learn to prioritize, keep things in perspective, and value a good night's sleep! There's nothing quite like having to balance studying for a final after managing last-minute coordination on the job site all day.



How did Cotter support you?

Cotter's tuition reimbursement program was a great opportunity and enabled me to carry on graduate studies at a pace I otherwise would not have been able to maintain. I had the benefit of working with a team of seasoned professionals whose backgrounds all came together in a way that made for an incredibly productive and happy work environment. This also made it easier to focus on my education outside of work hours. I think the exposure I had on the Conrac project was an incredible opportunity for me, and one that was instrumental in me completing my coursework. Based on where I was in my career and education, no other site or team could have been a better fit for me when I started at Cotter.

What advice would you give other professionals who are thinking about continuing their education while working?

I would only be able to share what helped keep me grounded while I balanced education and my career: it'll be fine, you'll get it done, just don't get ahead of yourself. Stay focused on the task at hand, and take it one step at a time.

Anything else you want to share?

I would like to again express my gratitude with a huge thank you to the Cotter team for all their guidance and support, and for all the opportunities! Cheers to what's to come.

Congratulations again to Hannah for completing her degree!

