

Bringing the Real World to the Classroom

In Ann Arbor, both sides benefit from a long-term collaboration between a professor and a practitioner.

For years, practitioners have been complaining that planning graduates are not equipped for the problems they encounter in a typical planning office. In Ann Arbor, we've tried to do something about it.

Our solution is Urban Planning 505, "Planning Techniques," a four-credit course offered to second-semester graduate students in the University of Michigan's College of Architecture and Urban Planning. The course is part of the required core curriculum; it helps prepare students for the six-credit workshop required of all students in the fourth and final semester of the two-year graduate program. In that workshop, students prepare plans for real clients in Detroit's inner-city neighborhoods.

UP 505 has a different aim. Although assignments require problem solving and the development of an effective planning strategy, producing immediately implementable, detailed plans is not the primary objective. Rather, our goal is to teach our students how to define a problem, gather information, apply analytic skills, and, finally, communicate their findings. We want to introduce students to the "big picture" of planning practice.

In some ways, our course resembles traditional workshop courses in planning. But in addition to introducing students to the world of practice, it is also designed to encourage them to think about the techniques of delivering information and of communicating effectively. For that reason, the course structure is a hybrid of lectures and field work. The students work either individually or in groups acting as planning firms.

Students in the class, now in its 11th year, have worked on a range of long-term projects, including commercial area revitalization and evaluating sites for a downtown conference center. In the early 1980s, one class studied reuse options for a downtown parking lot.

More recent classes have focused on solid waste disposal in the greater Ann

Arbor area and the proposed expansion of the municipal airport. Both the airport manager and the chairman of the citizens airport advisory committee cited the class report as a valuable source of alternatives. Recommendations for a regional greenbelt, prepared in 1988, won an award from the state APA chapter.

Last year's class took on the topic of implementing a travel demand management program for the greater Ann Arbor area. Next semester, the topic is likely to be state-level land-use planning. Our hope is that the class will serve as a forum for airing common concerns of local, county, and regional planners on such issues as urban sprawl and rural economic preservation.

Nuts and bolts

The trick in designing a course like this is to choose an assignment that is right both in a pedagogical sense and a practical one. Projects must be challenging but not overwhelming, and they must expose the students to a range of planning principles.

Some topics have been completed in one semester—the airport expansion, for instance. In other cases, we have found it useful to build upon previous student work in the same general topic area for several semesters.

We begin by jointly drafting a request for proposals to present to the class. We then organize the class into teams of four or five students. Each team is given responsibility for a different aspect of the project. Early in the semester, the practitioner half of our team meets with the class to provide background information on the community and the project in question. Both members of the teaching team evaluate the students' proposals and provide direction for their final report.

In addition to a written report, the students are required to present their conclusions to a local group that includes policy makers and officials. These presentations are often a good starting point for communitywide discussion.

The payoff

Many of the problems the students have investigated have been in an arena where it did not make economic sense for the planning agency to hire a consultant—at least not yet. First, some spade work was needed. In a sense the students are engaged in preventive planning, exploring alternatives that can be followed up on later.

Well-coached students can also be a useful data-gathering force. Student interviews with local residents have provided insights into particularly vexing problems. The students have also examined secondary source materials, such as census and opinion survey data.

Students can be used as trained observers of the urban scene. Unobtrusive observation of park use, parking lot usage, pedestrian or bicycle counts can all be extremely valuable but hard to accomplish within a planning department budget. The students can provide the numbers and do some analysis as well.

For the practitioner, finding time to work with the students is the greatest problem. The trade-off is invaluable assistance with tasks that might not otherwise be accomplished. The students approach each problem with a fresh outlook

The text for UP 505 is The Planner's Use of Information, edited by Hemalata Dandekar and published by APA's Planners Press in 1988 (\$27.95 for APA members and PAS subscribers; \$29.95 for others). All but one of the graphics opposite are examples of the book's skill-building exercises. The exception is the matrix in the center (Figure 11), which is from a student study of regulatory techniques for farmland preservation.

and are useful in identifying upcoming problems that most local officials ignore in the press of day-to-day business.

For the students, the value is clear: a realistic picture of what happens inside a typical planning agency. Although they are not paid for their work, the students report that the class has paid off indirectly when prospective employers take note of their practical experience. And in follow-up surveys of the curriculum, graduates of the Michigan program repeatedly identified this course as the best one for fostering professional skills.

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