Balancing Theory and Practice: Planning Education in Canada

by David Brown, MCIP

The Association of Canadian University Planning Programs (ACUPP) includes eighteen universities offering a total of twenty-four programs in urban and regional planning that meet the accreditation standards of the Canadian Institute of Planners.

The primary goal of the association is to promote excellence in planning education, research and practice by:

- Exchanging information about curriculum design, pedagogic methods and activities;
- Facilitating collaborative teaching and research;
- Promoting student exchanges and field trips;
- Promoting scholarly research on planning in Canada;
- Enhancing opportunities for students and faculty to work with professional planners, community organizations and other stakeholders on current planning issues and projects;
- Providing informed comment on the academic accreditation criteria and procedures that are administered by professional associations, in order to ensure these are appropriate, effective and fair;
- Facilitating international collaboration in planning education, research and practice.

While this list presents an ambitious agenda for a small association with very limited resources, we have been able to work towards many of these objectives through collaborative efforts with other associations. For example, ACUPP works closely with the Canadian Association of Planning Students (CAPS) and CIP on activities that promote planning education, research and practice. Students and faculty serve on several CIP committees, paying particular attention to CIP activities that concern academic affairs, publications, policy research and international programs.

A number of critical factors have influenced the development of planning education in Canada and our ability to meet our mandate.

Diverse approaches to common goals

On one level, ACUPP is an association of competitors: we compete with each other to engage the best professors, attract the best students, secure financial support for innovative research and outreach activities, and influence the direction of planning in Canada through academic publications and participation in public forums. Yet we are also members of the planning fraternity and share many common goals that are best achieved through close collaboration.

Fortunately, both competition and collaboration are well suited to the interdisciplinary nature of the planning field. In Canada, each planning school tries to develop a special niche that distinguishes its program while ensuring that the values and methods common to planning practice are covered in a core curriculum. While all programs cover urban development and land use planning, some focus on specific approaches to planning, such as policy analysis, physical planning, urban design, transportation, social planning and environmental planning. This diversity creates a rich academic mosaic across the country and a wide variety of options for students with particular interests.

The Canadian Constitution also contributes to the diversity of planning programs. As education and most professional planning responsibilities fall under provincial authority, the schools in each province must respond to different legislative requirements while meeting CIP's accreditation criteria.

Maintaining creative tension between academia and the profession

The relationships between practicing planners, their professional associations and academia are not always harmonious. Difficulties sometimes arise when program review committees seem to focus on a narrow set of methods and planning issues that committee members are presently dealing with in their practice. On the other hand, academics sometimes ignore the realities of planning practice and fail to prepare students for what they will experience when they encounter their first paying client or council.

In fact, both perspectives are important, and the best outcomes occur when academics and professionals freely exchange views about different approaches to planning education. Our graduates need skills that will be useful upon graduation. They also need a strong theoretical perspective that helps them understand and respond to the diverse forces that influence the urban development process. By becoming reflective practitioners, our graduates have the best chance of making an effective contribution to urban development and ensuring that the education they receive will last a lifetime. Reflective practitioners are effective in day-to-day planning while looking beyond the boundaries of particular projects to see how these projects fit into a larger, evolving picture.

In Canada, CIP's provincial affiliates play a key role in reviewing planning curriculum and the accreditation process. While each affiliate applies similar accreditation criteria, there are naturally some differences in substance and process that take into account specific regional concerns. Likewise, each affiliate is responsible for assessing membership applications while respecting national criteria.

At the national level, students who are members of CIP elect a representative to the national council, who sits as a voting member. In addition, a representative of ACUPP is a non-voting member of the council. Both measures are vital to the development and maintenance of harmonious and productive relationships.
between planning practitioners and academia, and greatly contribute to the smooth introduction of new graduates into the profession.

A core curriculum for planning
All Canadian planning schools must demonstrate that they meet the minimum standards set out by CIP. These standards serve as performance criteria: they indicate the material that must be covered and yet allow each program to respond to these criteria in its own way.

The criteria reflect the fact that planning is a future-oriented process that seeks to improve the quality of urban development. Recognition must be given to both idealism and practicality if plans are to reconcile current conditions with desirable outcomes. The profession endorses a set of values that includes explicit attention to social and environmental concerns.

As the CIP Membership Manual sets out, the curriculum must include at least three components: knowledge, skill and ethical values.

Knowledge
- Structure and function of human settlements
- History and principles of community planning processes and practices
- Legislative, legal, political and administrative aspects of planning and policy implementation
- Methods of policy implementation and planning
- Environmental and ecological aspects of planning
- Roles and responsibilities of planners

Skills
- Problem identification, research skills and data gathering
- Analytical skills
- Written, oral and graphic communications skills
- Collaborative problem solving skills
- Synthesis and application of knowledge to practice

Ethics
- Responsibilities of planners
- Understanding of the Statement of Values endorsed by CIP

The evolving context
The emphasis on theory, skills and ethics in the core curriculum reflects the evolution of planning in North America. While planning has a long history, it is fair to say that modern urban planning as it developed in the early twentieth century was greatly influenced by the effort to come to grips with the devastating effect that rapid urbanization and industrial development had on the health of people and the natural environment. At that time, clean water, sanitation services, hospitals, police and fire services, public transportation, and safe, healthy living environments were urgently needed. Given the broad consensus that these issues were critical problems to be solved by specific solutions, they have been referred to as "tame" problems.

In the intervening years, and especially in the 1950s and 1960s, we began to understand that most planning problems were much harder to formulate, let alone solve. The complex interrelationship between subject areas is amply illustrated by the transport of toxic chemicals through the food chain and the synergy between transportation infrastructure on land-use planning decisions. New planning techniques and processes were needed to address interdisciplinary issues and the concerns of multiple stakeholders. Public consultation, environmental impact analysis, strategic planning, and spatial analysis and modeling using geographic information systems and the Internet emerged as vital new tools for planning.

With these shifts, the classical physical land-use model of planning gave way to a myriad of issues that are inevitably interdisciplinary in nature. Concern also shifted from the notion that a plan was a product to the idea that a plan is a process. While physical planning outcomes remain important, attention is increasingly given to the quality of the planning process itself.

In this context, a variety of planning programs that favour diverse perspectives, and yet share a focus on knowledge, skills and values, offer an attractive approach to planning education. We hope you will explore the full range of approaches by browsing ACUPP's Web site at www.acupp-apucu.mcgill.ca, and linking from there to the sites of our members. We welcome any comments or questions that you may have about any of the programs.

David Brown is the president of ACUPP and the director of the School of Urban Planning, McGill University. His research interests include environmental planning, public participation and governance, planning in developing countries, and the role of geographic information systems in planning. He may be contacted at: david.brown@mcgill.ca