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Viewpoint *ACSP at 50*

As the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2009, it is timely to recount its current activities and assess some of the issues faced by the Association and planning education more broadly.

ACSP is a robust organisation. It has 94 full member schools and 20 affiliate member schools from the US and Canada, and 24 corresponding member schools from other countries around the world. Significantly, ACSP is totally volunteer-driven. The faculty and students of the member schools work through a structure of committees, task forces, and interest groups to set priorities, make decisions, and carry out the activities of the Association. ACSP has one regular employee to oversee day-to-day administration and manage the annual conference.

ACSP's mission statement describes the Association as a consortium of schools with 'shared commitments to understanding the dynamics of urban and regional development, enhancing planning practices, and improving the education of both novice and experienced planners'. The Association's activities are all designed to support those three goals – to strengthen scholarship in planning, to advance professional planning practice, and to improve planning education. They also define the issues facing the Association.

ACSP's two core activities for strengthening planning scholarship are its journal and annual conference. The *Journal of Planning Education and Research (JPER)* is now in its 29th year. *JPER* provides an important venue for the best scholarly work from all the sub-fields of planning, as well as work on planning pedagogy. Faculty of ACSP full member schools receive subscriptions to *JPER*, as do individual ACSP members. But most important with regard to scholarship are the hundreds of research libraries around the world that subscribe to *JPER*, in hard copy and/or electronically. Those subscriptions facilitate the intellectual exchange that is critical to the advancement of scholarship.

ACSP's annual conference also provides a venue for scholarly work from all the sub-fields of planning, as well as work on planning pedagogy. The conference is organised into 15 tracks, reflecting the range of interests among planning scholars. In recent years, conference registration has exceeded 800, with large numbers of attendees from Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

Every five years, ACSP and the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) hold a joint congress, which is also the annual conference of each associa-

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tion. These congresses have been remarkably successful in facilitating international scholarly exchanges. They alternate between European and North American sites. The most recent joint congress was in Chicago in 2008, and so the next one will be at a European location in 2013.

The success of the AESOP–ACSP joint congresses inspired an even more ambitious effort – the creation of a series of world planning schools congresses (WPSCs), the third one of which is scheduled for 2011. The first WPSC (Shanghai, 2001) saw the development of the Global Planning Education Association Network (GPEAN), a network of nine national and regional associations from around the world. GPEAN has taken on responsibility for the WPSCs. ACSP has been pleased to collaborate with its sister associations in support of GPEAN and the WPSCs. The WPSCs provide yet another opportunity to strengthen scholarship in planning through international exchanges.

Finally with respect to strengthening planning scholarship, ACSP has joined forces with its GPEAN partners to produce *Dialogues in Urban and Regional Planning*, a series of edited volumes consisting of the best articles published by faculty from member schools in each of the world's nine planning school associations. *Dialogues*, which is published by Taylor and Francis, tries to provide a look into planning scholarship from various perspectives around the world.

Turning to the goal of advancing professional planning practice, ACSP is active on two levels. At the institutional level, the Association works with the American Planning Association (APA) and its professional institute, the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), on a variety of issues. One recent example is the decision by AICP to establish a continuing professional education requirement for members to maintain their certification. ACSP worked closely with APA/AICP to implement the requirement. ACSP helped to specifically define the requirement and to determine what types of educational experiences (workshops, conference attendance, university coursework, and so on) would meet the requirement.

At the level of individual planning schools, ACSP provides forums for the exchange of ideas and experiences. Planning schools and their faculty often work closely with local practitioners. They provide consulting services, offer continuing professional education, supervise students working on studio projects or internships, and the like. In those roles they become aware of problems, opportunities, and emerging best practices in the profession. The ACSP conference, as well as the joint AESOP–ACSP congress and the WPSC, are all good venues to learn from one another. They provide opportunities to advance planning practice by critically assessing reports of practice experiences. When such reports are reduced to writing, they might also be appropriate for submission to *JPER*.

With regard to the third goal in the mission statement, improving planning education, ACSP is also active at the institutional level and at the level of individual planning

schools. Institutionally, ACSP partners with APA and AICP to support the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB). The PAB, which is now 25 years old, is the organisation that evaluates and accredits planning schools in the US (and two in Canada). It is a private organisation, authorised by an agency of the US government to accredit planning programmes. Four of the seven PAB members are appointed by the ACSP president.

The PAB establishes minimum criteria for accreditation, oversees a self-evaluation and site visit process, and ultimately decides whether to accredit planning programmes. Two of the three members of each site visit team are drawn from a pool nominated by the ACSP president. There are currently 72 accredited schools.

ACSP also takes an active role in trying to improve planning education at the level of individual planning schools. Of course the conference and *JPER* provide useful forums for discussing pedagogical issues: Planning Education and Pedagogy is one of the regular conference tracks, and the journal actively seeks and regularly publishes pedagogy-related articles. Perhaps more important, however, the Association supports and promulgates studies of issues facing planning faculty and students *qua* faculty and students. For example, ACSP recently completed a study of tenure and promotion policies and practices at member schools. Studies of parental leave policies for faculty and of the 'racial climate' for faculty and students are currently underway. The point of such studies is not to single out specific schools but to identify general problems, opportunities, and best practices.

In sum, ACSP is idealistic, wide-ranging, volunteer-driven and international in outlook. Inevitably such qualities present the Association with an ongoing string of issues, which it generally welcomes as opportunities to develop and improve the organisation. Many of the issues are operational and of little interest beyond ACSP, but three current concerns may be particularly relevant to the broader planning community.

The most immediate and concrete such concern is what might be called the data project. Internationally, and especially in the British Commonwealth countries, there has been an increasing effort to try to measure educational outcomes. That trend has arrived in the US. It manifests itself in two ways. The most important is the move by the PAB toward outcome-based criteria for accreditation. It puts the onus on planning schools to define measurable outcomes for planning education and to collect the relevant data. The other is that American universities are beginning to ask their schools and departments, including planning programmes, to define and measure outcomes as part of their internal evaluation processes.

Setting aside the arguments over the efficacy and appropriateness of outcome measures in planning education, defining outcomes, establishing data systems, and collecting data are major challenges in the highly decentralised US system of higher education. ACSP has been struggling with this on behalf of its member schools. The

Association established the Planning Schools Assessment Project (PSAP). The PSAP has been developing a set of outcome measures for planning faculty and students and collecting data on those measures. The intent is for the data to be available to member schools for use in accreditation and internal evaluations, as well as to scholars studying planning education. As the PSAP moves forward, there are questions about ongoing data collection so that time-series can be available, and about data storage and retrieval.

In the meantime, the PAB has taken the lead in creating a joint data task force among APA/AICP, ACSP, and PAB. All of these entities hold data that would be useful for planning schools facing accreditation or internal evaluations. The hope is to develop an agreed-upon set of measures and a single access point for schools that need them.

Paralleling the data project but not a part of it is the rise of ranking schemes. ACSP's member schools have generally been opposed to rankings. One of their major concerns is the type and quality of the data used to create rankings. In spite of this resistance, outside entities have begun to produce independent rankings of American planning schools. Recognising their inevitability, ACSP has created a task force to work on data issues with independent rankers.

A second concern with which ACSP is currently struggling is based in a perplexing reality that various studies have found. About half the graduates of US planning schools do not go on to traditional careers in land-use planning and development. Instead they work in economic development, environmental management, strategic business planning, public management, and so on. Planning schools value that diversity, of course. It leavens their programmes and also increases enrolments. However, these latter graduates often do not self-identify as planners. They do not participate in professional planning organisations or activities, or maintain connections with their school. They are lost to the field. ACSP and APA/AICP have begun discussions about how to hold on to these wanderers. The profession can benefit from the diversity that they bring in the same way that planning schools have done. The starting place for the discussion is a concrete version of that staple question of many courses in Planning Theory, 'What is planning?'

The 'what is planning' question also undergirds a third concern facing planning: the proliferation of international connections. Few would question the value of such mechanisms for scholarly exchange as the joint AESOP–ACSP congresses, the WPSCs, or the *Dialogues* series. We have much to learn from one another and opportunities for comparative analyses are almost always instructive for all sides. Perhaps most exciting, these globalising experiences raise fundamental questions about the planning enterprise: is there a universal concept of planning – relevant and useful everywhere? Is convergence around such a concept possible? Is it desirable?

There are, of course, a cluster of scholarly challenges to the notion of conver-

gence. One could ask if planning practice is context-specific with respect to institutions, legal system, and culture. One could also wonder if the increasing emphasis on place and identity contradicts ideas of convergence.

However, there are also real pressures toward convergence in planning education. For example, the Bologna compact is forcing a homogenisation of European planning education. Also, offshore planning programmes have requested accreditation from the PAB. And some have raised the question of whether having English as the *lingua franca* of planning risks privileging ideas from industrial nations of the west, especially the US and the UK.

The concerns around convergence are not a reason to question the emerging international connections in planning education and scholarship. Rather, they should help make ACSP and our sister associations more self-consciously aware of what we are trying to accomplish through those connections.

ACSP was the first of the national and regional associations of planning schools that have emerged in the last 20-plus years. As such, it was in the position of having to invent a number of practices that have since become commonplace in such associations – from institutional memberships to conferences to governance structures. While we have no models for the future of planning education associations, ACSP is no longer alone. We have a set of global partners with whom we will invent the future. In the words of the great progressive educator, Myles Horton, ‘We make the road by walking.’

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