

APA Planning Magazine, June 2004

Keeping Afloat

How university planning programs can avoid the ax.

By Sherrie Voss Matthews

Barbara Becker, AICP, director of the University of Arizona's school of planning, knows the writing is on the wall.

Barring a miracle, or a large donation, students in her planning program will have until 2005 to complete their degrees. After that, Becker's program will be no more.

Other programs across the nation face a similar fate: With declining financial support from the states, public universities are looking for ways to save money. And with costs rising at private universities, these institutions are also struggling to balance the books.

At the University of Arizona, the planning school will be completely eliminated in 2005. Tenured faculty will be dispersed to other departments, and junior faculty will be released from their contracts, Becker says. "We were allowed to accept students this past fall, but when we had people apply for January admittance, they were not allowed in," Becker says. The school currently has 15 faculty and 42 students.

Master's only? You may be at risk

While the University of Arizona has been the victim of budget cuts, some programs have been the victim of perception. The University of Rhode Island's planning program is currently petitioning to move from the College of the Environment and Life Sciences to the College of Arts and Sciences. The Rhode Island planning program has been threatened with elimination in its current structure and, in any case, would be a better fit within arts and sciences, says Farhad Atash, department chair and program director of community planning and landscape architecture.

"It's been a really long fight, unifying with friends on and off campus, coming up with a plan to save it," he says. The department of community planning received permission from the faculty senate to request a transfer, and negotiations are currently under way with the university president and provost to determine where a new home might be.

Atash hopes to have the issue resolved by July 1, when the new fiscal year begins, and before the Planning Accreditation Board arrives in the fall to analyze the program. Currently, his program has 6 faculty and 27 students.

Master's-only planning programs like those at Arizona and Rhode Island are increasingly under fire as universities struggle to make ends meet in an era of rising costs, increased tuition, and reduced state and private financial support. Smaller programs are increasingly at risk, simply

because when they are analyzed from a cost-benefit perspective, they aren't worth the cost to the universities, says Frederick Steiner, dean of the University of Texas-Austin School of Architecture.

At the University of Arizona, planning wasn't the only victim of recent budget cuts. Sixteen degree programs were put up for elimination — one out of every college. Only the library science program has managed to get a reprieve: It found a donor to give \$1.5 million to support the school. The doctoral or master's-only programs were most at risk.

"If we were able to get to get real money, we would have been able to save ourselves," Becker says. "But planning is a profession that is geared to the public, and the public is not in the position to bark up that kind of money."

University of Arizona Provost George H. Davis sympathizes, but he had to trim as the result of a \$45 million cut in funding from the state legislature. The university raised tuition by 40 percent in 2003, but that simply wasn't enough to save the humanities, atmospheric science, and planning.

The University of Arizona's strategic planning and budget committee created a list of six criteria through which to view every program on campus: quality and effectiveness of teaching programs, significant student demand, research strength, capacity to generate external funds, interdisciplinary and connection with other programs, and vital public impact.

"When the planning program is viewed through that set of lenses, it doesn't do well," Davis admits. Planning is one of many specialized programs that became vulnerable. "The programs that really came up on the radar screen were ones that were not broad and comprehensive," he adds.

Financial considerations

Planning programs typically are small: To achieve accreditation by the Planning Accreditation Board, they must have a student-faculty ratio of 10 to one. In an era where more students equal more financial support, small programs are at a distinct disadvantage.

"It's a business calculation; even in great universities, someone needs to pay their way," says Hemalata Dandekar, director of the school of planning and landscape architecture at Arizona State University in Tempe.

Frederick Steiner agrees that keeping a master's-only or a doctoral-only program alive has become quite difficult. He sees it as a numbers game: The more students you serve, the more financial support you receive, says Steiner, dean of the University of Texas-Austin School of Architecture, which has a community planning program with an enrollment of 600 students, about evenly divided between undergraduates and graduate students.

Steiner adds that one way to address the numbers issue is to add some undergraduate and graduate offerings that might attract students from other departments, such as public affairs,

political science, and sociology. By doing so, you are not only educating students about the importance of planning, you are also creating a more diverse funding base, he says.

Offering larger undergraduate, introductory courses such as "The History of the City" or "Introduction to Planning" opens up discussions on smart growth, livability, and sprawl. A minor in planning is another option, Steiner adds. It attracts architecture, landscape architecture, and geography undergraduates. "By putting all of your eggs in the master's basket, those numbers become difficult," he explains.

How to save yourself

Connections with those outside academia and urban planning are often the best way to ensure survival. At Rhode Island, Atash successfully mobilized alumni to rescue the planning program, and he connected with state and local officials. He worked to create an advisory board to assist his department.

About a dozen members serve on the advisory board, including alumni and state planning officials. The board works outside of the university structure but communicates with the University of Rhode Island's president and provost.

The board offered to hold a facilitated session at its own cost in order to create a three-to-five-year strategy plan for the department of community regional planning, Atash says. That example of commitment to planning has impressed the provost, he adds.

Involving the powers-that-be is crucial, Steiner agrees. One way to protect yourself if you are a small program is to align yourself with the mission of the university, and then be sure the university president understands what you do and why you do it. "You shouldn't face the danger of keeping it alive," Steiner says. "When you try to keep it alive, it's often too late."

Steiner frequently uses this example to explain planning to those who don't quite get it: "We are living in the first urban century, and that is a very profound shift in the way humans live. There's a lot more of us; we're going from 2 billion, to 9.3 billion, then 12. We'll be two-thirds urban, and planning and how we build cities in the environment is the research issue of the 21st century."

Pierre Clavel, a professor in the department of city and regional planning at Cornell University, says it's truly important to stay connected, not only with your alumni, but also with those outside the planning culture. For example, Clavel recalls that in the late 1980s the planning department had developed a good relationship with the dean of the graduate school. Although they didn't work directly together, they did work together on funding graduate fellowships.

Sometime later, when there was a question of moving Cornell's planning department to a different part of the university, Clavel says, this person weighed in and defended the program.

"It's because we had worked with her over time," Clavel says. "It's serendipitous. The more you are outside of your department, the better off you will be."

Merging departments

The debate rages: Should planning departments stand alone, or would they be better off merged with a larger university program, such as architecture or engineering, for financial protection?

It depends, says Clavel. "Our experience is that we have flourished in an architecture college." That said, there needs to be a mutual respect and boundaries, Clavel adds. The knowledge can flow both ways; planners learn from architects and architects from planners.

Steiner doesn't see mixing planning with other disciplines as a detriment. "If we believe planning is a broad field and one of planning's strengths is interdisciplinary, then we aren't watering it down; we are strengthening it," he says.

Steiner adds that once graduates enter the work force, they will have to work with landscape architects, engineers, and the like. Without a common understanding, miscommunication is bound to happen.

Gary Hack, AICP, professor of city and regional planning and dean of the graduate school of fine arts at the University of Pennsylvania, says that planning programs need the cover of more recognized fields. He also sees that synergy can be gained by working with architecture and landscape architecture.

"If you are sitting out there in a freestanding way, the administration never quite knows if it is important or not," Hack adds.

Building a bachelor's degree

Many programs have created a bachelor's program in urban studies or planning both to prepare students for master's programs, and to bolster numbers. Non-accredited undergraduate programs in urban studies, urban affairs, urban design, and so on will boost enrollments and allow graduate students an opportunity to teach, says Chris Silver, AICP, professor of urban and regional planning at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

But there is also a market for planners with only a bachelor's degree, Steiner says. Many smaller jurisdictions only hire people with a bachelor's degree, and for some students, a bachelor's degree is all they can afford in this day and age.

"Many people from poorer segments of our society aren't thinking grad programs: They are thinking how do I get through four years and go to work?" Steiner adds.

Dandekar emphasizes that there is no one-size-fits-all answer for every institution. Each university needs to consider the realistic expectation of what its market can bear. If a doctoral program is impractical, then programs should probably look for ways to provide an undergraduate program.

She also encourages faculty to get sponsored research that allows students to not only be self-supporting, but also make connections within the nearby communities. Although it is only a small amount of money, it is hands-on, reality-based study for the students, and it helps explain planning to the greater community. "Having the community think you have a good program is a good thing," Dandekar says.

Steiner agrees. In his years at Arizona State, he worked with Phoenix planner Ray Quay, FAICP. Quay encouraged the academics to adopt an undeveloped, 130-square-mile portion of land north of the city. The students used the area for class projects and service activities, Steiner says. Quay used the students to float ideas: If they worked, great. If not, they were "those crazy academics from Tempe."

In this way, the Arizona State planning program received grants for its research. The efforts of students, professors, residents, and city officials resulted in about 25,000 acres that were reserved for preservation. Steiner is now building a similar program at the University of Texas to preserve the Edwards Aquifer, which supplies Austin's Hill Country region with water.

Battled back

A decade ago, it looked as if the University of Pennsylvania's department of community and regional planning would be eliminated. The department battled back and now is thriving, says Hack.

"Each place is unique," Hack cautions. "We took a wide view of the roles that planners might play. We are not centrally educating people for the public sector; many more of our students go to private sector jobs."

By teaching planning and urban design in a broader sense, Penn has not only gathered more students, it has opened up new vistas for planning. It encompasses city building, renovating existing neighborhoods, and working for private developers.

The University of Pennsylvania also has a different way of distributing funds. Instead of having to compete for dollars from a general fund, Hack receives every dollar that arrives at the graduate school through tuition, grants, and the like. He must pay all the bills, and he doesn't have any budget lines.

While the university president and the trustees are there to be sure programs are of good quality, Hack is ultimately responsible for the finances of the department. "When you are accountable, you are really accountable," Hack adds.

Despite the dim future, Becker hopes that someday the University of Arizona's program will be where the University of Pennsylvania's program is now. She vows not to go down without a fight.

In a state like Arizona, which is growing very fast, "Why would you want to get rid of this program?" Becker asks. "There's clearly a need; we have 100 percent hiring out of this program."

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Images: Top — Pierre Clavel with students. Photo by William Staffeld. Middle — Frederick Steiner. Photo Marsha Miller. Bottom — Farhad Atash. Photo by Ali Atash.

Penn's Urban Studies Center

While some universities are eliminating planning programs, the University of Pennsylvania is expanding its planning focus. This spring, it announced the creation of the Penn Urban Research Institute, which will centralize the work of researchers who are already studying urban issues within the university's 12 schools.

"Urbanism has become one of the central themes over the past few years. We are creating an urban institute which is a university-wide effort to pull together all the resources in the urban area," says Gary Hack, AICP, dean of Penn's graduate school of fine arts and a member of the institute's executive committee.

The institute's co-director, Eugenie Birch, FAICP, says that its major mission will be to initiate collaboration among the researchers and teachers in the 12 schools. The institute will offer a master's and later a doctorate in urban spatial analytics. In creating the institute, Penn builds on its success in transforming a nearby West Philadelphia neighborhood by providing residents with new retail, education, and business opportunities.

"The president wanted to leap from this kind of activity (in West Philadelphia) to the academic sphere both to generate new knowledge and to make links across the world," Birch adds. The institute has a five-year financial commitment from the university; it is the result of 15 years of faculty suggestions and committee recommendations.

An executive committee of 17 faculty members and deans will help direct the institute, which will bring together as many as 40 researchers from across the campus. The researchers will have an opportunity to create a huge database of information from such sources as censuses and real estate records.

Such research would have been unthinkable a few years ago, before the emergence of new technologies, such as GIS software, that allow researchers to layer data onto maps. The data can be as diverse as zoning restrictions, real estate appraisals, and health conditions of residents. With such layers researchers can begin to see patterns, then study cause and effect.

Co-directing the institute will be Susan Wachter, professor in the Wharton School and a former Clinton administration assistant secretary for policy development and research at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, in directing the institute.