

*Threatened Schools:
Possible Responses*

ACSP Committee on Threatened Schools

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A number of observers have noted that planning schools are in trouble as a result of the general economic problems in academe. Several ACSP member schools face reduced budgets and possible elimination. On the one hand these problems may be due to temporary downturns in the economy, but a number of talented observers have argued that this is a long term trend in lowered economic standards and certainly lowered support for higher education. Enrollment trends are not favoring higher education or planning as a field.

Others argue that the public has lost confidence in higher education, and books on this topic continue to appear. Moreover, universities are being required to adopt management approaches to address the economic changes, known variously as managing for the future, refocusing, rebalancing, etc. This means that universities will be taking a hard look at their teaching and research missions, their program mixes, their high cost instructional and service areas, and their areas of lower productivity. Program review and outcomes assessment will continue as popular concepts during the 1990s. Higher education will cut back, and planning will be inevitably threatened.

Tom Galloway has written that planning programs have become insulated from the professions and the communities that they are to serve, and that academics have shown a disinterest in being involved with practice. Moreover he has pointed out that planning as a field is not uniformly highly regarded in the U.S.

On the one hand it would help to know about the size and nature of the problem, but on the other hand, we need a set of guidelines that threatened schools can use to respond now. This report then presents a set of guidelines that threatened schools can use today. The report was prepared by the ACSP Committee on Threatened Schools in consultation with the ACSP Executive Committee and with input from faculty members and administrators both at threatened schools and at schools that have successfully resisted threats.

Earlier drafts of this report were reviewed by the ACSP Executive Committee, and the final draft was distributed to ACSP program chairs for review and comment.

There seem to be two types of actions that are needed: preventive actions to head off threats and remedial actions that might be taken by those schools already faced with closure.

This report should also serve as a call to those schools who have been threatened to share with the ACSP membership those actions that were successful and those that did not yield results.

What are the threats?

The threats seem to fall into several categories:

- * Budget reductions, for positions and supplies and operating expenses
- * Elimination of positions, including hiring freezes and central recapturing of vacant budgeted positions
- * Actions for faculty reassignment, non—renewal, or termination tied to the reduction or discontinuance of programs
- * Program elimination through various reduction-in-force policies, up to and including the declaration of financial exigency
- * Combining of departments with the elimination of choice over faculty to be added to a department, and possibly moving of planning faculty to inappropriate departments
- * Mandated program reviews because of program duplication
- * Withdrawal of department/college/university support for accreditation in planning

Possible actions to consider

We believe there are several types of action that might be taken by planning programs, including preventive actions to head off as much as possible the threats and remedial action to take when threats begin to appear and to continue if threats should deepen.

Preventive

The most positive actions to take are those aimed at strengthening programs prior to their being threatened. Attention should be turned to the successful maintenance of the viability of planning programs in order to minimize the threats to their existence. Programs need to plan strategically for their future success and thereby optimize the likelihood for survival. Once the threat has materialized, prevention possibilities are gone, and the task becomes one of damage control.

Strategic planning:

- * Develop a program strategic plan addressing issues of philosophy, direction, market orientation, and the needs of the institution as well as the local area and region, etc.
- * Define clearly the purpose of the program and ensure that the university administration understands and agrees with that mission.
- * Prepare on-going, internal assessments of program productivity, student outcomes, and program contributions to college and university missions, and to the progress and prosperity of the state and localities served by the university.
- * Have chairs attend leadership training seminars or conferences. The leadership of the chair in assuring the survival and prosperity of planning programs is of prime importance.

Analytic activities:

- * Prepare background data and fact sheets that address the key questions that are usually asked about productivity, graduation rates, teaching loads, alumni placement, etc.
- * Develop a measure of what has been “produced” or “delivered” relative to your program’s mission. Conduct a serious effort of student outcomes assessment.
- * Develop some type of cost-benefit thinking, and even formal analysis, about the program’s contributions to the university, community, and region. This might even include evidence that of the superior job performance of planning graduates compared to graduates of other fields employed in planning.

Campus-based involvement:

- * Develop a supportive student body that is able to speak to the value of the program.
- * Involve department faculty in key campus activities, such as the Faculty or University Senate, budget committees, campus planning efforts, and other activities to give the program a higher profile.
- * Include planning faculty on key search and screen positions, especially those for directors, deans, provosts and vice presidents.
- * Expand externally funded research and scholarship in order to both enhance the departments reputation and provide additional supportive contacts and flexible funds.
- * Develop good working relationships with the associate provosts and associate vice presidents for academic affairs and all administrative offices, including offices outside the academic affairs sector of the university, e.g., student affairs, physical facilities, outreach/extension, etc. These people will be key individuals in the development of reduction and realignment plans. Of course, it will be necessary to work through the campus hierarchy, via associate deans and deans.
- * Involve practitioners, alumni and politicians in the program as speakers for events such as awards day, guest lectures, jurors, etc.
- * Nominate a prominent planner, politician, etc. for a university honorary degree.
- * Nominate a prominent planner, politician, etc. as speakers for events such as Honors Convocation, Founder’s Day, Commencement, etc.
- * Develop strong interdepartmental linkages (faculty appointments, joint research projects) across campus.
- * Develop a strong sense within the university of the importance the program’s faculty and students place on citizenship roles within the institution.
- * Encourage and support planning student leadership in college and university affairs.
- * Market planning courses to other departments on campus.
- * Devise course work that contributes to the general education requirements or core curriculum of the college and university.

Outreach to off—campus constituencies:

- * Develop strong ties to alumni who can speak effectively for the program.
- * Develop strong ties to area professionals and employers who can speak effectively for the program.
- * Develop strong ties to the state and local APA chapters
- * Use nationally distinguished faculty and practitioners as visiting lecturers both to increase the local and national visibility of programs, as well as provide opportunities for these visitors to see (and communicate to others) the strengths and the distinctiveness of programs (e.g., quality of students and faculty, innovative approaches of curriculum, pedagogy, course work, program scholarship and outreach, etc.) and to speak publicly in support of the planning program.
- * Cultivate prospective benefactors to the program, including both the program's alumni as well as conceivable friends (in and outside of the university) as appropriate to the program's thrust (financial institutions, real estate developers, social and environmental , et al.) and assist these individuals and groups to communicate to university administrators and the press the special accomplishments of the program on a *continuous* basis.

Publicity efforts:

- * Prepare an annual report (including quantitative data), even if not required by the institution. It will keep the campus leadership informed about progress and will serve as a useful set of comparable data that can be used to defend the program.
- * Develop an attractive annual report to send to alumni, professions in the area, friends of the program, etc. This will keep people informed of the program in a general way and they will be more inclined to support the program when called on.
- * Develop reliable contacts with the local media.
- * Develop on-going communication with the program's constituencies, the university public, the general public, and employers regarding the important contributions and distinctiveness of the program, its faculty, students and alumni.

Remedial

At the first indication that a program might be identified for possible reduction or elimination, the program should consider the following actions. Programs are advised not to wait until the university has decided to eliminate the program.

Staff efforts:

- * Develop a fact sheet that can be mailed and faxed to people who will support the program. Provide them with enough background to support the program intelligently, but do not prepare form letters or postcards. It is not the volume of mail and calls that is important, but how well the letters are reasoned and how important and influential the supporters are.

- * Develop a list of key supporters, including home and office addresses, phone numbers, and fax numbers.

- * Prepare a well reasoned response to anticipated campus questions. Convert these into several types of materials well in advance of needing them, including briefing papers, graphics, handouts, news releases, etc.

Faculty actions:

- * Establish a faculty network that can be placed into action when phone calls and letters are needed. Organize a phone bank.

- * Contact area professionals and employers to get them to write letters to key decision makers in support of the program. Get these people to agree to call key campus and system individuals at the appropriate time to explain the importance of the planning program. Personal phone calls are more difficult to get people to make, but they are more effective than letters alone.

- * Contact senior academics across the nation who will speak on behalf of the threatened program, making the point of the importance of planning as a field of study.

Chair/director actions:

- * Gather support from other units on campus. Obtain letters of support from chairs and faculty members from other units on campus that depend on planning program courses.

- * Develop reliable contacts with the local media, especially the campus newspaper, in order to get your message out to the university community but also to avoid being misrepresented by the media.

- * Contact the president of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning who is empowered to respond vigorously in support of threatened planning programs in whatever way is deemed desirable, including, but not limited to, writing letters of support, calling key administrators at the threatened school, and assisting in mobilizing support for the threatened program.

- * Contact the Planning Accreditation Board for possible support and advice.

Conclusion

The suggestions and guidelines presented here are the result of committee investigations and discussions with individuals from threatened programs and senior administrators who have had to deal with these matters. The information is provided in the hope that it will assist planning programs avoid and, if necessary, respond to threats to their vitality and very existence.

Planning programs that adopt strategies and tactics to deal with threats should frame those efforts in terms of goals and perceptions relevant to those who might reasonably support a particular program, as well as in terms of what is important to faculty and administrators associated with the program. External constituencies do not necessarily respond to the same issues as do faculty members and administrators.

In addition, planning programs should target specific support markets that offer promise rather than use a shotgun appeal to all conceivable supporters. For example, a large number of universities and colleges provide a planning graduate program's matriculants, while the number of employers of the program's graduates is probably much smaller. Moreover, the latter have a stake in the program's output; the former have little concern about their alumni's choices of graduate schools. In this case, a close focus to gain support may be more powerful than a scatter-shot effort.

Finally, planning programs might reasonably have in mind areas for selective retrenchment should some pull back be required. If full survival does not come to pass, the program should determine which of its programs (products or services) are least contributory to its goals. The program might also prepare contingency plans that include linkages or mergers with other programs on campus or even elsewhere in the university system. By taking these actions the program can retain some semblance of control, involvement and dignity during any down sizing.