

Krumholz Responds: The Case For Planning Certification

28 February, 2001 - 12:00am

Author: Norman Krumholz, AICP



The president of AICP responds to the charge that planning certification can actually harm a planner's career. AICP represents the highest standard of the profession.

Richard Carson tells us that he is a planner and a member of APA "who wants to be more than a planner" but also "a builder of community". So does every planner reading this newsletter. Carson also tells us that some "larger planning agencies are managed by people who are not AICP" and that some agencies are actually managed by lawyers and "political hacks". No doubt this is true, but the news will not surprise many planners.

So where's the beef? The beef is in his critique of the AICP designation as "such a joke."

According to Carson, the AICP designation "actually works against you as you advance" and "limits your ability to manage other professionals (i.e. engineers, building officials, scientists) because you are stereotyped". These statements are perfect nonsense for the following reasons:

1. As planning issues become more regional and complex, AICP planners are becoming increasingly diversified. More and more planners are moving out of traditional jobs in local government and working outside of city hall for banks, developers, foundations and non-profit community development corporations. On a day-to-day basis, many AICP planners are involved in negotiating environmental and NIMBY disputes, in acting as close advisors to their mayors and city managers and in coordinating the work of many departments of government including transportation, housing, social services and economic development. To think of the work of these AICP planners as "stereotyped" or rigidly confined is absurd.
2. The desire for top-notch professionalism in planning, just as in other professions, is not a new idea. It goes back to 1917 when the former American Institute of Planners was formed out of the earlier American City Planning Institute. So the idea of certification and professionalism which AICP now represents has a long and distinguished history.
3. Far from rejecting certification, planners are more interested. The membership size of AICP has continued a steady growth since its inception in APA, and the membership has never declined. Almost half of all APA members are now AICP; record numbers are now taking the exam; and it is likely that in 2001 or 2002 a majority of APA members will be AICP. Thus, in the judgement of an overwhelming number of planners, submitting themselves to examination and certification is a worthwhile thing to do. These planners are neither misled or foolish, but want to equip themselves to the highest standard of their profession.

4. Seeking certification by an objective organization and examination shows others -- the public at large, elected officials, and other professionals -- that the AICP planner has met certain minimum education and experience requirements. This is more reliable and professional than a self-serving resume. AICP is more than a certifying organization, but a leader in continued professional education.

5. AICP members must pledge to uphold a code of ethics and are subject to discipline if they are found in violation of the code. In my view, it is heartening to see that the planning profession is willing to adopt and abide by a code that defines conflicts of interest, responsibility to the public, and respect for human and environmental resources, all the very best instincts of a democratic society. Being an AICP member is more than just having a job in planning; it is a pledge to respect democratic processes and a standard of excellence.

Norman Krumholz is a 20-year planning practitioner and professor at Cleveland State University. He was formerly president of American Planning Association (1987) and is currently president of the [American Institute of Certified Planners](#) (1999-2001).