

## **AICP: Does Planning Certification Matter?**

7 February, 2001 - 12:00am

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Architects, engineers and lawyers have professional certifications. Planners have the AICP. But does it matter? Richard Carson argues that it will hurt your planning career.

If you want to have a career in planning, you have to make a few decisions about your future. This article is about making those professional choices. The poet laureate Robert Frost wrote, "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference." I know this road well and I have traveled it often. I have walked along the road less traveled to become the chief planner--several times.

I recently stirred up a few planners when I posted a response on the [Cyburbia website](#). A college student asked about "...the likelihood of getting a decent planning job straight out of undergraduate studies?" I answered him honestly:

"If you are going to work in consulting, then you need an advanced planning degree. Consultants market expertise. If you are going to work in government, then consider an MPA, or at least an MBA. In government you will advance because of your management and political skills, not because you are the best planner. That is why the AICP designation is a joke. It actually works against you as you advance. It limits your ability to manage other professionals (i.e., engineers, building officials, scientists) because you are stereotyped."

### **An Old Way of Thinking**

Saying that the American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP) designation was a joke sent many planners into orbit. Many planners asked me how I could degrade their achievement of becoming an AICP member. My answer is simple. I was telling planners not to limit their professional horizons because the demands of the profession are changing.

AICP was an attempt by planners to get the recognition that other professions were achieving. American history chronicles great public achievements like constructing bridges, parks, canals, subways and buildings. We recognized the engineer Major Pierre L'Enfant for designing Washington, D.C. and the landscape architect, Fredrick Law Olmsted, for designing New York's Central Park. A lot of attention was given to architect Frank Lloyd Wright's work, including Ayn Rand's book "The Fountainhead" and a movie starring Gary Cooper. All of this helped drive planners into a fury of professional envy. Planners pushed hard to get registered. However, only a handful of states went along with this idea. In America, we license food handlers and hairdressers, and we register engineers and architects. The reason planners failed to get registered has to do with public safety. Architects and engineers build structures that can fail and kill people. Planners build communities and it takes 20 years to find out if we screwed up. People don't die from a bad plan.

My own experience over the last 25 years has been that the larger planning agencies are managed by people who are not AICP. Lawyers seem to get a good share of the jobs, as do political hacks. This occurs because these positions are in reality political appointments. Planners occasionally get these jobs if they know something about politics, the law, modern management -- and planning.

This begs the question, "Why are we taking tests?" The answer is that we take them to prove we are worthy of the society we wish to join. It is a worthy goal, but a shallow victory.

### **A New Professional Paradigm**

One of the changes to the planning profession is organizational. In the old model, every city or county had a separate planning director, building official and chief engineer. Each ran their own group and represented an independent step in the development review process. In the modern world of continuous improvement and quality teams, more local governments are creating a single work group that integrates these disciplines into a team that works on development applications together. This also changes management responsibilities.

As planners, we don't have a PE (professional engineer) behind our name. We aren't trained in using the Uniform Building Code. When we put AICP behind our names, we are reminding our multi-disciplined teammates that we are planners -- and they are not! You may get some short-term satisfaction from this, but it will work against you becoming their boss someday. Don't to stereotype yourself. Keep your professional options open. Be more than a planner. Be a community builder.

By the way, the American Planning Association recently announced history's top six "most significant planning pioneers" in Planning Magazine. The winners were Daniel Burnham (architect), Lewis Mumford (writer and editor), Fredrick Law Olmsted, Sr. (landscape architect), Ian McHarg (landscape architect), Kevin Lynch (architect) and Alfred Bateman (lawyer). These folks never took an AICP test.

The majority (57%) of the membership of APA do not belong to AICP.

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