

Turning Points in Planning Education

The UNC Experience

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Planning education in the US faced major turning points during the last half of the twentieth century. It went from design to social science-based curricula, developed functional specializations beyond comprehensive planning, introduced computer technology, and responded to globalization. This article reflects on the impacts of these turning points on the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

During the last half of the 20th century, the American system of planning education grew into the largest and most developed in the world. The number of planning programs multiplied, enrollments soared, and curriculum content broadened. At the same time, the number of practicing planners grew exponentially as government, private, and nonprofit planning programs increased and the nation urbanized.

The Department of City and Regional Planning at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill was a leader in the development of US planning education. As one of the earliest and largest programs, it played an important role at both the regional and national levels. The “Missionaries of Chapel Hill” reached out to communities throughout the South (Verner 1987—see article reprint on page 25), while the faculty produced path-breaking research and planning textbooks, such as *Urban Land Use Planning*, now in its fifth edition.

The 2004 site visit report by the Planning Accreditation Board described the Master’s degree program well:¹

The UNC planning program has led the development of the profession in practice and scholarship for nearly 50 years. Its faculty are among the giants of the field. The program has always managed to score at the top on both scholarship and the teaching of practical knowledge....The program endows its graduates with an expectation of excellence that sustains them throughout their careers.

This article identifies major turning points in this development trajectory and reflects on their meaning for the future. Its theme is the maturing of planning education, including its struggles to adapt to a turbulent social, cultural, and institutional environment. I was part of this history through my roles in the UNC planning program, in national US planning organizations—APA and AICP (and their predecessors, ASPO and AIP)—and in the planning education association, ACSP.²

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Four turning points stand out: 1) adoption of social science-based curricula, 2) development of functional specializations beyond comprehensive planning, 3) introduction of computer technology, and 4) response to globalization.³ Each of these are considered individually, as well as their interconnections, through the lens of the UNC planning department's history. To set the context, the American growth in demand for planning and the establishment and maturing of the UNC planning department is first discussed.

Rise of a Bull Market for US Planning

The modern American planning movement began in the progressive era, between 1890 and 1910. It grew slowly up to the time of World War II (Scott 1969). The original American Institute of City Planning started with 21 members in 1917 and had only risen to 149 members by 1940 (Krueckeberg 1983).

Demand for planners in the US took off in the post-World War II period. The pump was primed by the passing of the Housing Act of 1949, which increased federal support for local planning programs, as well as the later highway, urban renewal, comprehensive planning assistance, model cities, and war on poverty programs. Birch (1980) calls the period from 1945 to 1960 "the explosion of planning." The impact of post-war federal programs on planning was "life-saving" for a profession that had been on hold during the war (Krueckeberg 1983). By 1970, AIP had nearly 5,000 members.

The 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, the Health Resources Act, and the National Historic Pres-

ervation Act fueled further demand for planners. AIP membership reached 11,000 in 1976. As US urbanization continued apace in the 1990s, many states expanded their planning laws to include growth management and Smart Growth (Godschalk 2000). The number of members in the American Planning Association surpassed 30,000 by 2005 (www.planning.org).

Growth in planning education paralleled growth in the planning profession. When the UNC planning department was established in 1946, there were only seven

graduate planning programs in the US. The number increased slowly until 1954, when less than 20 universities offered graduate planning programs, and fewer than 100 students received Master's degrees in planning that year (Kaufman 1974).

As the demand for planners increased, planning schools proliferated. By 1973, there were 60 universities offering Master's degrees in planning, graduating 1,000 students per year (Kaufman 1974). The rate of increase continued for a time,

but then slowed, and some programs were eliminated. As of 2006, the ACSP web site listed 70 accredited US planning programs (www.acsp.org).

Creation and Maturing of the UNC Planning Department

When the UNC planning program was established in the post-war period, there were no other planning schools in the southeast—then an underdeveloped region very different from today's booming Sun Belt. University leaders at the Institute for Research in Social Science saw the need for a course of education to train regional



Jack Parker (with pointer), Jim Webb (seated with glasses), and Stu Chapin (sitting next to Webb) with students in 1955. *Photo courtesy of David Godschalk.*

and state planners to assist the region in modernization. The Institute director defined regional planning as “the union of modern social science, design, and engineering. It utilizes social science techniques to analyze the adjustments between men and their physical environment and adjustments among men in their effort to meet human needs” (Parker 1974).⁴

After considerable negotiation, the University approved the creation of a Master of Regional Planning degree and the hiring of John A. “Jack” Parker to head the new graduate program in regional planning. The UNC program was the first in the US to be established as a free-standing department in a graduate school, rather than a design school. Despite the regional planning degree title, Parker, who brought a focus on physical planning from his master’s degree training at MIT, stressed the immediate need for “city planning” education.

With salary assistance from the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a second faculty member, James A. “Jim” Webb, was hired in 1947. F. Stuart Chapin, Jr., the third faculty member, was hired in 1949. As Francis Parker (1974) notes: “The three-man faculty, all with planning degrees from MIT, epitomized three different talents, with Parker the administrator, Webb the practitioner, and Chapin the researcher. Much of the growth of the



The DCRP program aimed to prepare students for professional practice in the planning field and to develop a study and research center on planning problems. *Photo courtesy of David Godschalk.*

department was to stem from this complementary set of skills.” The core faculty remained intact until Webb’s retirement in 1973, Parker’s in 1974, and Chapin’s in 1978, providing valuable stability in the first decades of the new program.

Five students enrolled in the planning program in 1946. The department was housed in the Alumni Building, including its own library. The program aimed to prepare students for professional practice in the planning field and to develop a study and research center on planning problems. The catalog described the scope of planning as improving standards of urban and regional life and the community’s economic base, as well as recognizing the need for public participation. It stated that planners, more than others in the public service, need to understand the interrelationships of the social science and design disciplines.

As the department matured, the number of faculty and students grew, and the curriculum expanded. However, under Parker’s leadership, the basic framework of the department remained in place into the 1970s. As a result, the history of the UNC program can be divided into two eras—the Parker era and the post-Parker era.

During the 1946 to 1974 era led by Jack Parker as the permanent program head, program changes were incremental. Parker administered the program and played a major role in faculty and student recruiting. His deft touch in external relationships with the University secured a new home for the program in New East Building in 1965. Department parties, animated with potent bourbon punch, took place in the Parker garden. Standing committees of the faculty were not established until 1971, when the first department bylaws were adopted.

From 1974 to 2006, a succession of six faculty members served as program chair.⁵ In this period of different leadership styles and agendas, there were more fundamental changes. Administrative responsibilities were decentralized, and students became more active in de-

partmental affairs. Faculty meetings took on important decision making and policy formulation roles, including heated debates about core course requirements and faculty recruitment.

Over the years, the UNC planning faculty remained relatively stable, averaging about 14 full-time positions. There has been turnover, as some professors resigned or went to other programs within the University. However, a solid cohort stayed aboard to reach emeritus status through retirement or phased retirement, maintaining the continuity of the program.⁶

The student body has leveled off at about 120. For the 2005-06 school year, there were 80 students in the professional Master's degree program, 15 in dual degree programs, and approximately 25 students in the Ph.D. program. Throughout the life of the department, students have built a strong sense of community, enlivened departmental activities, and activated DCRP's social conscience. For example, during the campus upheaval after the Kent State massacres in 1970, planning students went on strike, hanging a large banner on the front of New East to the chagrin of university administrators. The student government organization, Planners' Forum, organized social events, professional speakers, and Habitat for Humanity work parties and student editors staffed *Carolina Planning*, the longest running student-led planning publication in the country. Both of these entities still continue today (see sidebar on page 51).

Adoption of Social Science-based Curricula

Early US college instruction in city planning was dominated by the design fields—landscape architecture, civil engineering, and architecture (Krueckeberg 1983). UNC, with its emphasis on an interdisciplinary balance of social science and design, was an exception to this design dominance. In that respect, the UNC program was well prepared for the emerging strong emphasis on social science, especially in the training of doctoral stu-



Jim Webb (far left) with other professors and students. *Photo courtesy of David Godschalk.*

dents and in faculty research.

Research capabilities at UNC were enhanced by the establishment of the Center for Urban and Regional Studies, which grew out of a five-year grant in 1957 from the Ford Foundation to fund an urban studies program. Most of the department's research projects have been housed in the Center, which has its own campus building—Hickerson House. The Center averaged \$1.6 million per year in research funding for the five year period between 2000 and 2005.

The UNC planning Ph.D. program was approved in 1961. It graduated its first doctoral student in 1964. The doctoral program developed a reputation as one of the leading social science-based planning programs in the country. As recently as 1994, evaluations of the program have noted its strength in research methods and its leading scholarship in regional and local economic development, land use and environmental planning, and developing areas.⁷

At the national level, the tumultuous social unrest of the 1970s, coupled with the rising demand for planners, led many universities to appoint Ph.D.-bearing faculty with

little academic training or experience in planning. These scholars, drawn heavily from the social sciences, tended to be skeptical of professions and focused on planning theory and evaluation (Birch 2001). Using grants from NIMH (National Institute of Mental Health), UNC also recruited some faculty from outside the traditional planning field to focus on social and health policy issues.⁸

Social concerns also penetrated the planning practice associations. In the 1930s, AIP stated its mission as the “unified development of urban communities and their environs and of states, regions and the nation, as expressed through the determination of the comprehensive arrangement of land uses and occupancy and regulation” (Birch 2001). In the 1970s, APA dropped land use from the mission statement, changing it to advancing “the art and science of planning” and fostering “the activity of planning—physical, economic, and social—at the local, regional, state and national levels” through contributing “to the public well-being by developing communities and environments that meet the needs of people and of society more effectively” (Birch 2001).⁹

Development of Functional Specializations beyond Comprehensive Planning

Early planning education sought to train a “generalist with a specialty” (Perloff 1957). The 1946 UNC catalog did not list formal specializations, but it required students to complete a four-course major in political science, sociology, or economics. The core was the body of techniques and skills needed to prepare and implement an urban comprehensive plan; most of the coursework was presented in studio formats. Students learned by doing, as they worked with small and medium-sized towns throughout North Carolina to introduce the concept of planning (Nocks 1974). (For more on this, see the article by Pat Verner on pg. 25.)

National standards for planning education were set by the original AIP recognition program and its successor, the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) program.

In 1973, the AIP recognition standards suggested that programs should “consider” developing specialties. By 1989, PAB required familiarity with at least one area of specialization; however, it relaxed that requirement four years later (Dalton 2001).

Over time, DCRP created areas of concentration to identify the field of practice in which the student expected to develop competence for a professional career. These concentrations represented combinations of available faculty resources, employment opportunities, and societal needs. For example, the 1981-83 catalog listed six areas: housing and community development, land use and physical development, environmental and resource management, social program development, transportation, and economic development. Aside from dropping social program development and adding sub-specializations related to real estate development, sustainable development, and design and preservation of the built environment, the same specialization areas appear in the current department catalog (available online at www.planning.unc.edu/program/masters.htm).

Inevitably, development of specialized areas creates some tension between faculty interests and planning practice. An increasing proportion of faculty members are trained in, and maintain professional identities in, fields that are related to planning but are not planning per se. Contemporary university performance standards for promotion and tenure center on research and publication productivity (the “publish or perish” syndrome), and the peer review system for research grants and journal publication also encourages more specialized research and publication. As a result, there are few incentives for generalist analyses or practice-related activities.

The gap between planning education and traditional practice, represented by APA and AICP, continues to widen. Planning practice is often viewed by academics as an object of analysis and criticism rather than a focus for substantive contribution. Because university sup-

port for attendance is typically limited to one conference per year, most planning faculty participate in the annual ACSP conference or in other disciplinary meetings, rather than the APA conference. (To read more about the growing gap between practice and research, see DCRP Chair Emil Malizia's thoughts on pg. 26.)

Introduction of Computer Information Technology

Computer information technology advances have had an overwhelming impact on planning education. Every area of teaching and learning has been affected, including planning theory, methods, and applications. Information technology has become so firmly embedded in the culture of planning education that it is hard to remember that the main tools of the planning student in the 1950s were typewriters, t-squares, Prismacolor pencils, and calculators.

The basic types of information technology applications are geographic information systems (GIS), analytic models, the Internet, and visualization and communication programs (Berke, Godschalk, and Kaiser, with Rodriguez 2006). This new landscape of technology provides a wealth of data, information, and techniques for planning analysis and public involvement in decision making. It has revolutionized the planning process, changing it from a closed, expert operation to an open, community-based process.

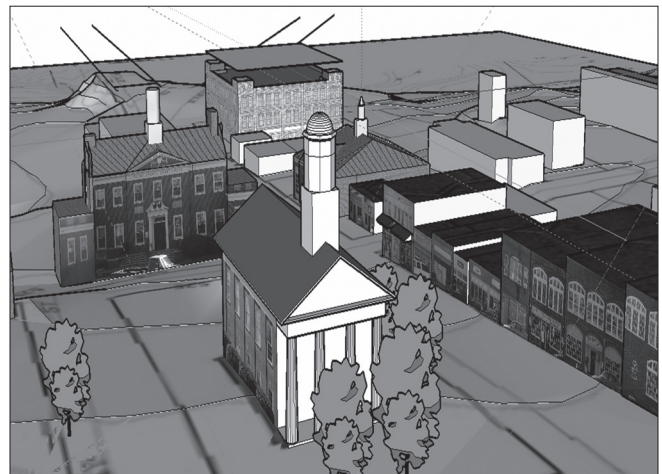
At an early stage, the UNC planning department recognized the importance of the new technology, particularly the revolution in spatial analysis provided by GIS (Godschalk and McMahon 1992). However, as with many planning innovations, the department ran ahead of the university, which had not yet implemented the necessary systems. To overcome the lag, in 1989, department faculty, staff, and doctoral students negotiated a contract with IBM to acquire the computer hardware and software for a computer graphics laboratory, in return for designing and teaching a short course on GIS

applications. For several years thereafter, the department had to scramble to maintain and expand its computer information capability, with limited university funding and support.

The university now provides excellent hardware, software, and technical support. A full-time planning faculty member teaches GIS, and the Geography Department offers a number of additional GIS courses, as well as a certificate program. UNC students have access to a wide range of databases and programs. For example, land use students employ the latest GIS software to make their hypothetical city plans and students in urban design and site planning courses carry out their assignments with SketchUp, a design program from @Last Software, now owned by Google, Inc.

With the possible exception of analytical model creation, most progress in computer information system development for planning applications has been made by practitioners and business firms (Klosterman 2001). Thus, planning education departments have been able to look to external sources for best technology practices to use in their research and teaching.

One area of computer information systems where universities have taken the lead is in the development of distance learning. However, the use of distance learning



SketchUp model of Hillsborough, NC. Image courtesy of Michael Schwartz.

in graduate planning degree programs is very limited (Godschalk and Lacey 2001). As faculty have discovered, designing and teaching courses via the Internet is a very labor intensive process. Planning programs have offered individual courses through distance learning, but have not tended to substitute it for face-to-face teaching in full-fledged degree programs. DCRP offered a few early distance learning planning courses, but has not continued them.

Response to Globalization

Globalization has sparked a final turning point in planning education. Opening the world's boundaries brought new challenges to US cities, businesses, and universities. Globalization changed the planning geography, the decision structure of businesses, and the demographics of university faculties and student bodies.

Two traditional economic mainstays of the North Carolina economy—textiles and furniture manufacturing—have been hit hard by global competition. Many of the state's urban areas have seen plants closed and workers laid off. DCRP faculty have been leaders in researching the state and local impacts of economic restructuring and their implications for public policy.

DCRP faculty and doctoral students also conduct research on issues in developing countries through the World Bank, the United Nations, the Fulbright program, and other venues. Global issues also were highlighted in the 1990s, when the department hosted the Hubert H. Humphrey Fellows program, bringing a number of mid-career planners from abroad for a year of study at UNC.

The department briefly offered a specialization in international planning, but found the focus too general to attract students.¹⁰ A more popular option is the UNC program of international study and exchange. Planning students can take a comparative study semester in one of

20 European universities in eight countries where UNC has exchange agreements. Department faculty maintain an ongoing relationship with development economists and planners at the Vienna University of Economics and Business, in a program led by former DCRP professor Edward Bergman.

Another type of response has been to add faculty members from other countries. Home countries of department faculty now include India, Pakistan, Colombia, Argentina, China, and the United Kingdom. All of these faculty members hold advanced degrees from US universities. Many of them maintain ties with planning in their homelands where they consult and do research.

Some planning programs at US universities have become dominated by foreign students. The UNC planning student body has always enrolled some international students, but the number and diversity has not increased substantially, except in the doctoral program. As of the 2005-06 school year, there were four foreign students in the Master's degree program and eight in the doctoral program.

Looking Forward

What insights might we draw from this brief account of 60 years of planning education experience? We know that the future will be different than the past, but that it will include continuing threads from our history. We can hazard some guesses about likely impacts of yesterday's turning points on tomorrow's directions.

Social science likely will continue to shape the intellectual foundations of planning education, both in terms of disciplinary methods and normative concerns for social justice. At the same time, design and physical planning are likely to become a more vital part of planning education, responding to the energies of the New Urbanism movement, Smart Growth, and the quest for livable communities. Further middle ground will emerge

in practice, blending social science analysis and design idealism. Increasingly, the natural sciences will become part of the equation, not simply for understanding natural environments but also for improving human life and health and creating sustainable communities.

Planning specializations will likely deepen, as planning scholarship becomes more sophisticated and more narrowly defined. It will be increasingly difficult to find planning education generalists. However, we are likely to see interesting new interdisciplinary combinations, similar to ones that have developed in the combinations of computer science and genome science, and interesting new theoretical combinations, such as GIS modeling and complexity theory. By educating disciplinary “boundary spanners,” we will improve our ability to understand, model, and intervene effectively in urban development processes.

Computer information systems will become ever more useful, ubiquitous, and user friendly, expanding planning’s horizons. As stakeholders learn to use these new analytical methods, they will not permit the adoption of plans that rely simply on broad brush estimates and gloss over the impacts of value decisions on different groups. The new planning support systems will facilitate “collective design,” in which community members analyze and debate goals, scenarios, and alternative proposals. They will contribute to more effective dispute resolution and consensus building.

Globalization will require development of new planning theories and methods, as well as new approaches to planning education. A much broader definition of comprehensiveness will emerge, straining the boundaries of planning thought and practice. Planning law will be called upon to include international principles. Sustainable development approaches will go beyond individual localities and states to take on strategies for remedying poverty and resource depletion on a worldwide basis. Tomorrow’s planning leaders will be called upon to operate on an international scale.

At the same time, planning programs like those at UNC will continue to cope with the age-old issues of reconciling theory with practice, with integrating the concerns of the university with those of the profession, and with educating both conservative and progressive decision makers on the benefits of good planning. The next half century promises to be as exciting, messy, and challenging as the last half century.

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Endnotes

- 1) See DCRP Master's program evaluation by the 2004 Planning Accreditation Board site visit team in Part III, Strengths of the Program, of the "Final Site Visit Report," dated January 28, 2005. pg. 9
- 2) The previous practice organizations were ASPO, The American Society of Planning Officials, and AIP, The American Institute of Planners. In 1978, they were merged and replaced by APA—the American Planning Association and AICP—the American Institute of Certified Planners (Birch 1980). The planning education organization is ACSP—the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning.
- 3) A planning department is a complex mix of ideas, people, and resources. This necessarily brief account touches only on some of the UNC program's high points and issues. Undoubtedly, it is biased by my experience and perceptions. History is a moving target. Others might identify different turning points in planning education, such as developments in planning theory or methods, depending on their perspectives. For other viewpoints, see Birch (2001), Dalton (2001), and Hopkins (2001).

4) Francis Parker is not related to Jack Parker. His unpublished 1974 papers, "Genesis of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Chapel Hill" and "Planning Education at Chapel Hill: A Decade of Incremental Progress," are excellent accounts of the establishment and early history of the department. Much of this section of my article is drawn from his narratives.

5) Following Jack Parker, the DCRP chairs have been: George Hemmens, David Godschalk, Michael Stegman, Edward Kaiser, David Moreau, and Emil Malizia.

6) Following the retirements of the original three DCRP faculty, the next cohort of retirees included Maynard Hufschmidt, Shirley Weiss, Edward Kaiser, David Godschalk, David Brower, Raymond Burby, and David Moreau.

7) See the external evaluator's report to the UNC Graduate School on the DCRP doctoral program: "Ph.D. Program Evaluation Report," dated March 25, 1994, pg. 3.

8) In 1969, UNC offered a concentration in health and social policy planning, led by two professors trained in social policy at Brandeis University. However, the bulk of the UNC planning faculty have continued to hold planning degrees.

9) Many American planning programs followed suit by refocusing their curricula on aspatial policy planning. DCRP was one of the few that kept land use in the forefront of its teaching and research.

10) This international planning focus was titled the Planning in Developing Areas concentration.