

AICP Exam Feedback

Washington State APA Chapter

May, 2003

I just completed the AICP exam this past weekend and was completely bewildered with the content of the exam. I did attend the Washington Chapter study session and read the so called "Green Bible." In addition, I subscribed to the online study guide PlanningPrep. I felt very prepared based upon the information I was directed to study to take the exam on May 10th. The exam was not reflective of the materials that were recommended for preparation. I am hopeful you can recommend some text books on City/County Administration and budgeting. I also feel that APA should acknowledge that the exam is not very reflective of the practicing planner, and is reflective of the job functions and decisions of a city/county administrator.



Our study session covered a lot of history and law, hardly any financial or admin information which seemed like the majority of the test. I thought the test was interesting, but that the information covered on it was very generalized. I definitely would not use it as a measure of my capability as a planner, it doesn't correlate with anything I do in my job.



Questions seemed to fall into three categories:

1. I knew them from studying (facts, history, topical areas) or from professional practice.
2. I did not know them, had no idea where the question had come from (I did read the Green Book from front to back plus this and last year's study materials) and just guessed.
3. Really poorly worded questions that should have been essay or short answer but which the authors were trying to turn into multiple choice.

These typically fell into the "which of these techniques would be least effective" or "which step would should the planner undertake first."

For almost all of this type of question I felt that information was inadequate or that there were many outside factors that the question did not take into account.

Overall, I'm not convinced that the majority of things they tested would actually determine whether or not I should be worthy of being a certified planner.

The best part of the whole process was my study group - they absolutely got me through and were a great way to meet people from other organizations - I thank the study session that you held for that.



I thought the test was tough but fair and well balanced. The study guide helped, although there is no amount of studying that can make up for experience.



I must have gotten the same exam as the person who said there was an emphasis on budgeting/management type questions. I would say that I didn't leave the exam with a lot of confidence, but perhaps that is just how you feel after a three hour exam :)

Afterward, I met up with a few people to debrief and we discovered that we all had different exams. How many were distributed? I heard rumor of about 5 different exams.

I'd say overall, the exam was difficult but fairly reasonable.

In almost all instances where I was unsure about an answer, I could definitely narrow it down to one of two choices. A quick reread of the question often helped with the deductive reasoning.

However, I will say that I did not necessarily feel like my studying helped a whole lot (most likely because I did have a lot of questions about managing a planning department and budgeting methods-not something I necessarily studied for).

I was also a little unprepared for the recent Census trend questions I had on my exam. I had a grasp of general trends, but couldn't really speak to say migration patterns or growth of a particular ethnic group.

I found the study session quite helpful overall, and the study materials worthwhile. I had been studying on and off prior to the study session and I felt the session helped me to focus my study efforts.



Hi, I took the test last year as well and missed by 2 points. This years exam had less history/people/case specific questions and much more scenario items. It also had less multiple combination questions than last year (which was nice). However, it was not easier than last year, just different.



I did not feel that the test was hard in the sense that it used much brain power. It was interesting, in most circumstances I could narrow down the options to two solid responses either one of which may be the correct answer given just a little more detail. I felt that the questions were very subjective which required the participant to read between the lines. I did not necessarily feel that the test was reflective the breadth of information and knowledge that should be held by professional planners. Additionally, after discussing the test with others after the exam it appears that other tests contained multiple questions regarding simple Mathematical calculations such as slope calcs and FAR where mine contained none. It leaves me with the sense that the different tests may not be equal in their test of professional knowledge.

If I were to suggest any changes to next years prep course I would recommend that you hand out the information that was presented at the study session and let folks study that

information on their own and spend time discussing the professional biases and ideologies of the APA and AICP. We are all supposed to be practicing professionals and we should not be spending valuable study time presenting facts to each other that we should be able to assume that we are already familiar with. Instead we should focus on the principles and beliefs that are held by APA and AICP that make the certification worth pursuing. Just my initial thoughts. Do you know when will we hear the results? Thanks for providing for the study session.....and the opportunity to vent. Take care.



Having only practiced urban planning/urban design on the private side - I found the test (more than I expected) overly geared toward the role of a planning manager working in a public agency. I was glad not to see too many questions focused on planning history, etc... but a little more balance between public and private consulting should be considered for future exams.

The study prep was very helpful - thanks for putting it together.



The exam is difficult and if I passed I don't think it was by much. I found that 3 hours was plenty of time. My one criticism of the test would be that some of the stuff really seems to be "trivia":

- The amount of African-American immigration in and out of the south during the 1990s
- Which one of the following is not eligible for section 8 funding: rental utilities, rental maintenance, rental rent, administrative costs. (I'm not getting this quite right but you get the idea).

From my perspective there are a couple things that would be helpful for future planners preparing for the exam:

1. The court case summaries are helpful but they need a summary at the bottom so that you can really get a sense of why the case is important. Example: If you read the summary of Golden v. Ramapo in the manual it is very difficult to figure why this case was important.
2. This test had, from my perspective, a lot of economic development, housing questions, and project management questions on it. These are areas that are difficult to find information on in the typical planning text, at least that I used. Since I have no experience in the first two areas I felt pretty lost.
3. I got a copy of the practice tests and they were very helpful.



I would agree with the first person. It wasn't nearly as complex as the AICP/APA cd-rom they sold for this year's test. But it was fair and it took almost the full 3 hours. At this point I feel neutral about the test. (I'm not sure I passed, but I'm not sure I failed.)

I purchased Michael Waiscez (sp?) study guides (including the tests) and found them to be helpful. A lot of the admin/budget questions were within his study guides. I guess he has a study session in the Portland area. By the time I found out about it, it was too late. Apparently, it is very good.

The demographer you had as a speaker actually was the most helpful. My test had a number of census questions. While I was unable to answer some of the specific national/regional trend questions, I think he was the most pertinent speaker.

The Colorado APA chapter had a summary document I thought was pretty good. Although I did find some errors and misspellings, it was a good summary - especially if someone wasn't able to come to the Saturday study session. I would suggest the Study session handouts and overheads be put on the WA Chapter webpage and also, have AICP links to other helpful websites.



It's somewhat difficult for us test-takers to compare our feelings about the test, because it appears we all got different tests. At least that was the case where I took the exam in Bellingham. In talking with one of the other test-takers it was obvious that we got different mixes of questions. He didn't get any questions about GIS, mapping, or figuring out slope percentage, but I got several of them. I got a lot of questions related to the 2000 census, but he didn't. It was obvious that the questions were not just presented in a different order-- they were different sets of questions.

To be honest, I don't know if I passed or not. This is not just an expression of a suspected borderline performance on my part either. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that I did very well, or very poorly, or just good enough, or not quite good enough. This lack of certainty about how I did is very unusual in my experience. Throughout my college and grad school days I pretty much always knew how I did on a test after I took it. I think this "not knowing how I did" phenomenon (which seems to be almost universal) is specifically because so much of this test is subjective.

Many of the questions had multiple correct answers, and choosing the right one (or right pairs, or best 3, etc.) depended on your perspective. I knew this coming in, so the real challenge in preparing for the test was trying to understand the mind set of AICP, and then answering questions based on what I thought AICP would say, not necessarily based on what I would do, given my experience. Often the AICP (politically correct?) perspective is not consistent with how we day-to-day planners have to function in the real world. Here's an example-- several questions were about public participation and involvement in the process, and the questions often asked which was the most effective, best, most appropriate, etc. method to use to communicate with and involve the public. Problem is, the "AICP-right" answer to many of these types of questions would not be feasible in the environment we small-town planners work in. Given the fact that planning resources are severely constrained, many of the methods that AICP thinks should be used are simply too expensive or too labor intensive. This is just one example, but I found this whole issue of perspective, and the too frequent "ivory tower" perspective of AICP to be a problem area with regard to the meaningfulness of the exam.

I believe that in any case where one must know the mind-set and bias of the one giving the test in order to perform well on a test of a given body of knowledge, there is something fundamentally lacking in the testing approach. I studied a fair amount for this test, and the fact that in retrospect I don't think any amount of additional studying would have improved my performance (whatever it was) is indicative of the fact that too much

of this test is subjective, based on perspective (opinion), and not enough on objective knowledge.

The fact that there is no way to give or receive any meaningful feedback on performance is also a problem. You aren't allowed to take the test booklet with you for reflection-- you are given a questionnaire that would have taken me 3 additional hours to fill out comprehensively-- you don't find out what questions you got right or wrong-- and there is no mechanism for challenging errors in grading. I have heard that questions are weighted, but haven't had that confirmed. You get a score, but it doesn't relate to a percent right or wrong. This process is so mysterious it seems more like a fraternity initiation rite than a test of my planning knowledge.



I guess it was close to what I expected. There was less computation and quantitative than I expected. There was more economics than I expected. I can't really say if it was harder or easier. My only criticism would be, and this was partially borne out in the prep material also, but knowing the question style and skills of taking their test was pretty important. For much of the test it appeared to be less about knowing the material, but the ability to "take their test." Some of that certainly is inevitable in any instrument. Thank you for your help in getting us ready.



Overall, the test (or should I say tests) covered the full range of the planning profession and many relevant (and a few irrelevant) issues. It did appear in our de-brief that the various versions had their own distinct emphasis. Emphasis being a predominance of questions on a given topic area compared to what the others noted. An example was a series of questions on federal housing programs on one exam, with almost no history and law questions, and another exam being perceived as virtually the opposite. One of your other e-mails indicated someone thought there were too many management and administration questions.

We noted the cleverness in a few questions, using the same 4 answers, but asking different questions (first comprehensive zoning ordinance or first historic preservation ordinance). It was also noted that overall it was a comprehensive but grueling test.

From a study stand point, it does not seem possible to "study" for everything that might be on the exam. We each approached our studying differently (cramming, leisurely study over many months, heavy reading, study cards, mock exams, broad cursory reading, sharpen what you know, focus on what you know you don't know, etc). Each approach paid certain dividends, but there is just too much minutia in our profession to study it all.

One would have to be an expert in all areas, doing all the work simultaneously, every day for decades to have enough breadth and

depth, AND have a photographic memory to be able to answer all the questions with confidence. We all agreed that "next year would be easier" or at least we'd have a better idea what to expect.

I found the study session you organized to be valuable with helping to think about how to get prepared for the exam. However, very little specific information that came out in the session was really usable in the format presented.

Perhaps an emphasis on topic areas, or on keys to studying in a given area (i.e., what to look for when reading a court case, or a federal law, rather than listing cases or statutes in the session) might be more valuable. This sample exercise approach worked well in Brad's Ethics Code session. Not everyone has experience quickly briefing a court decision, analyzing a federal statute, allocating transportation dollars, or doing simple statistics or land survey calculations. More "how to" refreshers with less background and history might be more helpful to test-takers (they'll have to study the history and background anyway).

Lastly, there were many questions (maybe 10) that I thought were very poorly worded. Had I more time on exam day I would have cited them on the evaluation form (this form/process is a problem - how can you copy the problem questions verbatim without cutting into your exam time?) Some of confusing words may be intentional, but some of it was just confusing. Two examples that I recall. It stated "A planner has a conflict of interest with project X" (not a potential conflict, but a definitive "has" a conflict), then it asks whether he has a conflict of interest? Secondly, using "planning department" and "planning agency" in the same question (even same sentence). Are these the same entity or two layers in one organization? The answers are quite different depending on how you interpret these words.

I've written exams, so I have true appreciation for the difficulties. I would hope our appeal process is meaningful (as we profess all processes must be) and that it isn't needed too often.



I thought the test was reasonable. Martin and I had been studying with the CD set the day before and were finding ourselves very frustrated/confused. I had set myself up to be really frustrated/disappointed however, during the exam I actually felt pretty confident and well-prepared. (Of course, I didn't have any feedback to convince me otherwise, as on the CD exam!) My version of the test was very heavy in public process/ethics, finance and transportation questions. I was only surprised by the transportation questions - trip demand/location mapping(?) in the CBD, smart road technology and another trip destination mapping question that I had never seen before.

In general, I felt like I studied appropriately. I highly recommend the study guide (best \$15 I have spent in a long while), the Saturday study session and the AICP CD set. I went through a couple of the books on the recommended reading list, and while that made me feel good & productive in preparing for the test, I am not sure it helped me answer any questions.

The only other comment I have for you is that I know you and Martin discussed the value of the AICP in the public/private sectors. I know it is not a big deal at all for us at NBBJ; maybe that's because we're interdisciplinary & planners are a minority here, I don't know. But I wonder if either the certification is just not enough of a known entity yet or if it's just a case of each planner assuming it is more important in another setting (grass is always greener...)? It probably also has something to do with the lack of licensure as a requirement to practice planning.



Overall, I felt the distribution of questions was very even and there was very few questions that related to each other (or provided other information to other questions). I thought the ethic questions were tough and that several had two right answers however, they were obviously looking for the best one in relation to the code of ethics. The prep course was very helpful!