Presidential Address: Big Things Come in Small Packages: An Agenda for ACSP
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Presidential Address: Big Things Come in Small Packages: An Agenda for ACSP

Editors' Note: This presidential address was delivered by incoming ACSP president, Eugenie L. Adner Birch, on 21 October 1995 at the 36th annual conference of the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning in Detroit, Michigan.

A TIME TO CELEBRATE

This is a celebration. It is a celebration of the successful presidency of Catherine Ross and all her predecessors. It is a celebration of our accomplishments past and present. Who would have believed when the first 78 or even 144 of us met in Cincinnati and then in Washington, D.C., only 15 years ago in our first independent meetings that ACSP would be where it is today. Collectively, we have successfully plotted a course that has brought us:

- a conference, 600 strong with over 150 panels, thanks to Robin Boyle, Robert Lincoln, and their able associates at Wayne State, Michigan State and the University of Michigan;
- a transformation of our four-page newsletter to the highly respected *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, so ably edited for the past few years by Charles Connerly and Bruce Stiftel and now moving on to its fifth set of editors, Mickey Lauria and Robert Washington of the University of New Orleans;
- the publication of our ninth *Guide to Graduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning* (Contant et al. 1994) and fifth *Guide to Undergraduate Education in Urban and Regional Planning* (Cooper and Reiman 1994) and probably 50 to 100,000 brochures floating around describing our work;
- a smoothly functioning accreditation process that has strengthened us internally and externally with our universities—one that will sponsor 11 reaccreditation and four new program evaluations in this year alone;
- new relations with our sister organizations, notably AICP, that have yielded tangible results: The Best of ACSP slot at APA conferences and the coeditorship of *Green Book* by Charles Hoch and Linda Dalton;
- a splendid communications network throughout the world: We will be convening our Second International Conference with the Association of European Schools of Planning (AESOP) in 1996 in Toronto and, today, we welcome many European colleagues who are here, especially Patsy Healey, President of AESOP. We are reaching out to our Latin American friends at the Fort Lauderdale conference in 1997 and to our Asian associates at the Los Angeles meeting in 1998;
- a significant amount of recognition from such federal agencies as the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that chose us to cohost its conference on Urban University Partnerships on Wednesday and the Federal National Mortgage Association (Fannie Mae) that gives substantial financial support to our annual meeting. Of course, we celebrate the leadership and vision of two of our own in this area: HUD Assistant Secretary Michael A. Stegman and the new Director of the HUD Office of University Partnerships, Marcia Marker Feld. We should be proud that our schools are so well represented among the recipients of the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) and Joint Community Development (JCD) awards—capturing substantial grants to link neighborhoods and universities.
- the hard work of 34 presidents and hundreds of committee members that have brought us to our current state of robust fiscal health. We have money in the bank and we will move ahead. (We
are so mature that we even have an investment committee to oversee our reserve.) Now do not get me wrong, we do not have a multimillion dollar endowment, but we do have a cushion that will allow us to focus on more than financial survival.

And that is what I really want to talk about today. While I love singing our praises and, of course, could easily be tempted to detail the personalities and events that compose our illustrious history in greater depth, I cannot and will not do this. I believe that more urgent issues are at hand, ones that are cause for alarm. As I share my thoughts, you will see that I am alarmed not for today but for tomorrow.

**ON FURTHER REFLECTION...**

Let us take another look at ourselves that is less self-congratulatory. Let us put ourselves in a larger context and find our place in the university environment. My thoughts, by the way, are occasioned in part by the new *Graduate Guide* so efficiently edited by Cheryl Contant and Peter Fisher (Contant et al. 1994) of the University of Iowa. For the first time in ACSP history, these editors have assembled aggregate information about planning programs. Here is what we can learn from their work:

- **We are small**, we are expensive, we are often isolated from the mainstream of universities and large numbers of our faculties are getting older, inevitably moving toward retirement.

Further, anyone who reads the newspapers or just listens carefully in the halls of academia knows that we are operating in universities that are increasingly questioning their respective missions, downsizing, looking at benchmarks, measuring full-time equivalencies (FTEs) for students and faculty, engaging in strategic planning a.k.a. rethinking resource allocation, andsmarting from the threat or actuality of shrinking research contracts. On top of all this, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* estimates that masters programs will shrink by 9% in the next ten years and that doctoral programs will remain stable.1

Our academic leaders talk in dark and ominous terms about permanent changes about to occur in higher education. They caution that the educational landscape is to be transformed in the years to come. As we regard these phenomena, elemental questions arise. Have we positioned ourselves sufficiently to survive in this environment? Can we depend on the customary financial support we have received over the years? Will our programs continue to grow or expand? These questions stand out even more starkly as we review our qualities of being small, expensive, isolated, and old. Let us take a look at just how small, expensive, isolated and old we are.

- **We are small.** Relatively speaking, our programs are dwarfed in large universities. They are few in number, engage small student cohorts, and make high demands for faculty.

There are 120 programs in institutions of higher learning, and 2,100 such institutions in the United States—we are in 6%. Collectively, we are teaching about 3,600 master's candidates and about 200 Ph.D. students. There are 1.7 million graduate students in the United States—we account for 0.2%. Last year, American universities awarded approximately 370,000 master's degrees, we gave an estimated 1,800 or 0.4% of them. Eighty percent of our programs are in large universities having 20,000 or more students. Our average master's population per school is 60, but 46% of our programs have a head count of under 50. Our students are 3% of population of their respective universities. Finally, 65% of our programs have nine or fewer faculty.

- **We are expensive.** Accreditation standards call for five full-time faculty or its equivalent. We are in agreement about this minimum. I do not question it. However, this standard may be an anomaly in most universities. Ninety percent of our programs have student:faculty ratios of under 1:10 while only 20% of their universities have such a number.

- **We are isolated.** The majority of our instructional effort is in masters and Ph.D. programs. In the past, favorable university funding formulas have supported this arrangement by allocating proportionately more dollars or teaching credit for graduate students than for undergraduates. Consequently, we have tended to neglect college-level teaching even though the greatest growth potential might be there. Contrast to 1995 national number: 12 million undergraduates and 1.7 million graduate students are registered.

Wim Wiewel (Wiewel et al. in press) of the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle recently completed a survey of 50 planning programs situated in urban centers. (By the way, 61% of all programs have such a favorable location.) He solicited and analyzed their universities' mission statements. Although he uncovered many trends, the single-most startling fact he found is that only six identified an urban mission among their visions. Of these six, only one or two mentioned urban planning programs or their faculty among those listed as helping fulfill this mission.

- **We are getting older.** Two-thirds of our planning programs started in the 1960s. At the time they hired new, young faculty. This faculty is remarkably stable, and today many are still involved. They

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1 | See Wiewel et al. in press for a more detailed analysis.
are, however, a generation older. Out of curiosity, I began to count the graduation dates of faculty listed in the Graduate Guide. This is a tedious job at best, and certainly not how I like to spend my time. Nonetheless, after completing this task, I found evidence for what we all know instinctively: more than half are graduates of the fifties and sixties. This group will soon move on to other things.

**OUR FUTURE**

So here we are: small, expensive, isolated, and older. As I mentioned earlier, I do not see these qualities as a problem for today, but they could become catastrophic for tomorrow, if we do not collectively address them. As universities examine their budgets, review their missions, and allocate their resources, they may not consider planning as central and important relative to other competing interests. As planning faculty retire, universities may choose to place their lines in other, more needy departments. Slow erosion or vastly reduced program resources are certainly possibilities for small, expensive, and isolated programs.

This bleak scenario does not have to be our future. We have within our ranks the very expertise required to avoid it. We, all academics, are singularly qualified to deal with these conditions because inherent in our training are several helpful attributes. In a nutshell, we can fairly say that we are future-oriented problem-solvers, who analyze issues comprehensively, pull communications together, create processes to develop consensus, and become activists for causes we believe in.

Now is the time to employ these qualities. Clearly, each of us will have to sustain unique responses tailored to our own university situations. Each needs to assess local conditions and devise particular solutions. For example, some may become more active in undergraduate instruction, others may participate in community outreach or training opportunities to enhance the university presence. Above all, each plan should address specifically the constellation of features that make us vulnerable. The objective is to become intractably imbedded in the life of our institutions, known for the intellectual liveliness, scholarships, teaching, and other skills we possess.

ACSP has an obligation to facilitate this action. As you know, the ACSP constitution outlines seven purposes for the organization, all relating to the advancement of knowledge about planning education and research. To accomplish them, especially the one referring to the provision of a forum for identification and discussion of issues in planning education, I propose the following six-part agenda.

1. **Reconfirm the Anchors**

   We must continue to educate our potential students, our academic colleagues, university administrators, and the wider community about what we do. Our European colleagues have certainly shown us one way of disseminating information in their recent publications of European Planning Education (Healey and Piccinato 1995) and The State of Spatial Planning in Europe (Working Group on the Curriculum of Planning Education 1995).

   As we reconfirm our consensus about the anchors of our field we must articulate in clear terms our expectations about the common knowledge our students gain under our instruction and bearing our degrees. In so doing we will place the field within the context of American society, outline the broad elements that distinguish our discipline from others, and demonstrate how we insure their passage into planning education. We will demonstrate links to other fields. As a bare minimum, we can assert our expertise in improving the present and future course of human settlement through data analysis and policy development that synthesizes related factors and is arrived at through open participatory processes. We can also demonstrate the field's special ability to join knowledge with action in the pursuit of its primary objective.

   We have many methods for reaffirming our expertise and need to produce a definitive statement for our generation, equivalent to Harvey Perloff's (1957) Education of for Planning, and David Godschalk's (1974) Planning in America: Learning from Turbulence. We must circulate this statement in our journals, and perhaps in a separate publication. We must use our declaration to focus our research and teaching. I expect to engage a wide constituency in its development.

2. **Raise Our Visibility and Strengthen Our Base**

   To counteract the small-expensive-isolated phenomenon, we must launch an offensive to demonstrate our many strengths in advancing the missions of our respective universities. Some programs are well along in this area; others have not yet begun. As a first step, we can share the experiences of our member schools. We have, for example, some anecdotal information. The University of Southern California has begun a Building Better Communities Program that is destined to hit every high school in the region and later the whole state; Cleveland State and Hunter have blockbuster freshman courses, attractive to urban and suburban students who have lived in, but never really looked at, metropolitan areas. There are many other stories to be related. ACSP will assemble, showcase, and disseminate them. You should be hearing from your ACSP regional representatives about this initiative.

3. **Communicate Our Message**

   ACSP will continue to support its current publications, but it must go beyond the written word. We will develop a home page on the Internet. We are well along in this area. Within the next year we will be on the World Wide Web.
Our home page will be intricately linked and carefully constructed thanks to William Drummond and his students at Georgia Institute of Technology. This connection will open wide possibilities. It will include personal and city profiles available to a broad list of unsuspecting web surfers in America and abroad. Maintaining this effort requires careful monitoring and coordination as well as considerable labor. Nonetheless, we have the expertise and we will go forward in this area. ACSP will have a Technology Committee to oversee this project.

4. Assemble Simple, Comparative Data

We need to know more about ourselves beyond the data we already have. We are receiving increasing questions from university administrators about peer institutions. We cannot claim ignorance. We must develop and control responsible data sets. We must monitor the status of our programs systematically. We will not however, rate programs. We will soon begin a pilot built on the work of Jay Stein and his committee over the past three years.

5. Strategically Position Research, Teaching, and Service Activity

The advancement of knowledge regarding planning will continue through refereed journal article activity and conference organization. This function of ACSP is and will continue to be primary. We scholars must support this effort. ACSP will fund but you must publish in the Journal of Planning Education and Research and other planning journals. We cannot afford to be open to criticism of faculty failure to publish in their own journals. In addition, we must develop ways to shape our referee standards to showcase the many things we do well. A pressing challenge is to translate our community service and technical work into scholarship. I am hopeful that the JPER editors, their editorial board, and those who serve as referees will tackle this challenging task, especially since recent HUD funding of university community partnerships should be yielding an enormous amount of data.

6. Strengthen our Chairs and Faculty

We must be alert to emerging trends in higher education and savvy about how to meet them. We cannot wait until we have a threatened school in our hands. ACSP must serve as a vehicle to inform program leadership in clear practical terms and on an ongoing basis about the challenges they confront. It should serve as a medium exchange of information and techniques about meeting them. The Committee on the Academy and the Profession chaired by Tom Galloway will spearhead this effort.

Our Chances of Success

Thinking about the coming years and the role of ACSP, we know that we are small, expensive, isolated, and older. These are not irreparable liabilities. These qualities can and should be turned into assets. Being small, we can move quickly to adopt to change. Being expensive, we can look for means to appreciate our value. Being isolated, we can make strategic moves to break out. Being older, we can take advantage of our collective wisdom.

Our agenda is really quite clear. We must reconfirm our anchor; raise our visibility and strengthen our base; communicate our message; collect simple, comparative data; position our teaching, research, service; and strengthen our chairs. Above all, we must remember that we are fortunate to be engaged in a discipline that has endless fascination, is squarely relevant to everyday life—after all everyone in the world lives in some kind of human settlement—and is dynamic and fluid.

Our agenda is not new. It is a continuation of many previous initiatives. We have all the pieces in hand. Our challenge is to weave them together into a cohesive, long-term strategy. We may be small and expensive, but we are also vigorous and tenacious. We need to remember that big things come in little packages. I am confident that the collective energy and wisdom in this room, among our members and in our programs will support a concerted effort to sustain and nurture our forty-year history of successful growth well into the next century.

Eugenie Ladner Birch

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Notes

1. All national data come from The Chronicle of Higher Education Almanac September 1, 1995.

References


