AICP Exam Survey Results

Beginning in 2013, APA Ohio has been conducting a survey of Ohio members who have been approved to take the AICP test. Once the testing period is opened, APA Ohio sends out an invitation to take the survey to all those who have been approved to take the exam.   Our hope is that we will develop a robust data base of information on how much time and effort it takes to both apply for and study for the AICP exam, and advice on the best study materials and test taking tips.

So far, *a total of 50 members have participated in the survey*, and the results to date are summarized below:

Pass Rate of Respondents
Of the 50 respondents, 48 had taken the test and 39 passed. Of those that passed the exam, six had taken the exam one time previously.

Application Preparation
On average, the respondents spent approximately 10.4 hours to prepare the application over a two week period, though the median was 8 hours and the range was from as few as 3 hours to as many as 35 hours.

A majority of the survey respondents gave some advice on completing the application, most frequently to allow enough time to prepare a thorough and thoughtful application. A listing of the complete responses is included at the end of this report (p 3).

Test Preparation
Of the 46 who took the exam and responded to the question of test preparation, the **average number of hours spent studying was 72**, close to the median of 67.5 hours. However, there was quite a range of responses, with one person studying about 3 hours and another studying over 300 hours. Of the 36 people who responded about the period over which they studied, the **average was about 10.9 weeks**, close to the median of 10 weeks.

Advice for Future Test Takers
The survey provides respondents an opportunity to share their studying advice on what worked and didn't work for them. Not surprising, test takers have provided a wide range of tips to the open-ended question. A summary of recommendations and their frequency are highlighted in the table below, while the complete responses are located at the end of this report (p 5).

Common suggestions:
- Start early
- Use common sense/practical knowledge
- Go beyond APA/AICP Review material - don't rely solely on APA's Planning Prep website

Types of resources used sorted by frequency of response

15	Practice exams
14	Notecards and/or online flashcards
14	Planetizen Course
9	AICP Exam Prep 3.0
8	Read Planning Magazine
6	Reviewed AICP Code of Ethics
6	Study Guides
4	APA Planning Prep website
4	CD study manual published by the Chapter President's Council available from APA Ohio Chapter
4	YouTube webinars of APA presentations
3	Study guide available from the APA Pennsylvania Chapter
3	Took a Pretest to identify weaknesses (see http://planningprep.com which offers a number of practice exams and feedback on your strengths and weaknesses)
2	Know court cases
1	APA National Conference study session
1	APA podcasts
1	Participated in a study group

Helpful Websites/Guides

- The website http://planningprep.com/ provides a number of free practice tests with feedback on your results that identifies your strengths and weaknesses.

- Georgia APA chapter - includes downloadable PowerPoint presentations that are prepared and presented at the Chapter's annual AICP Exam Review session. http://georgiaplanning.org/aicp/aicp-exam-reviews/

- North Carolina APA chapter – includes planning law materials and research methods presentation (as well as links to APA's AICP website and Georgia APA's website. http://apa-nc.org/aicp/

- Pennsylvania APA chapter – includes downloadable PowerPoint presentations from the chapter's Professional Development Committee's annual AICP exam prep session. http://planningpa.org/for-planners/professional-planners/aicp-exam-prep/

- Takings Decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court: A Chronology. By Robert Meltz, Legislative Attorney. July 20, 2015 https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/97-122.pdf

Support from Employer

Of the 47 people who responded to the question about the type of support received from one's employer, 57% received some type of financial assistance to take the exam and 55% received verbal support/encouragement, and 41% received some time off work. In contrast, 19% indicated that they didn't receive any type of support from their employer.

Support from Employer

	No of Responses	% of 47
Financial Assistance	**27**	**57%**
Some financial support	11	23%
All financial support	16	34%
Verbal Support	**26**	**55%**
Some Time Off Work	**19**	**41%**
Time off work to take exam	13	28%
Time off work to study	6	13%
None of the above	**9**	**19%**

Advice for Completing the AICP Application – Complete Responses

What advice do you have regarding completing the application for people who are thinking about applying to take the AICP exam?

1. My application was not approved although I cannot figure out why. Need help with the essays, I guess. I wrote about my 7 years leading zoning code revision projects that included participation from a range of stakeholders.
2. Organize your thoughts/responses beforehand, and then the writing comes easy. Proof your responses.
3. Read the Exam Candidate Bulletin
4. Answer questions, but not too wordy. Found process to be a little intimidating.
5. Gather all your job data early. Have someone double check it for you. And get at least 3 sets of eyes on your essay answers, including at least one who isn't a planner.
6. Allow adequate time to completely respond. Don't try to complete all at once.
7. Focus on planning experience and be thorough. Include work done as internships and school projects.
8. Make sure you have enough real world experience, and/or a planning degree.
9. Begin sending out letters of recommendation requests 4 weeks prior to application deadline.
10. Read the application materials at least 3 months before you want to apply. That will give you time to get certain documentation that is required without feeling rushed.
11. The application is the easiest part of the process to be honest. Although it is time consuming, if you meet all of the criteria to take the exam, this part is simple.
12. Make your project experience relevant to planning
13. It's easier if you're only using one job to meet the eligibility criteria, otherwise you have to write the same 4 essays for each additional position.
14. Do it early. Don't wait for the last minute.
15. DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE! Treat it like a take-home exam. Typical college exams included multiple choice and then an essay at the end; applicants should view the application process as the AICP exam's essay questions.

16. Phone and ask questions if you're in an unusual situation, because the application isn't very specific. (In my case, I waited YEARS until my actual hours on the job added up to the required experience, but it turns out that the way the hours are computed I could have applied earlier -- like 2008 instead of 2013.)

17. Use the Microsoft word document they give you to fill out the application. Look at the questions and understand what they are looking for and write down some tasks / skills that you've done to fulfill that question. Try and use different projects / examples for each question - then go back over and complete each question thoroughly. I used my resume as a guide and applied it to the application.

18. Do not try to do the application all at once. It helps to develop the essays over time. Also, do not wait until the last minute to get information from others, such as transcripts.

19. Start early

20. Make reference to your experience and make sure to address all elements of the questions.

21. Be succinct. Stick to your direct planning experience.

22. Try to meet the required work experience through one work position so that you only have to write one series of application essays.

23. Focus on skills, experiences and how they relate to the application questions.

24. Read questions carefully and keep responses tied to question.

25. Write about your work experience as if you are interviewing for a job. Even if your work experience doesn't quite match with a question on the application, you can relate your tasks to this in some way. Pick questions to answer that are more general (ethics, thorough decision making) that can give you a strong essay even if your work experience wasn't necessarily working for a public planning department.

26. Have several coworkers proofread the application to ensure you are addressing all components of the Criteria.

27. The application process gets onerous if you have had more than one employer in your past so keep that in mind. Also for past employers plan ahead to reach out to them to get their letters since it is very likely folks you knew then have moved on to other jobs.

28. Take it serious and thoroughly review the question and your response(s). Be sure to look at the application questions and responses from a point of view other than yours. And ask yourself does my response make sense and address the question.

29. Gather needed materials early. Ask co-workers or professional friends to review answers.

30. Work on getting employment verification letters early to make sure you have them in time.

31. Use all planning experiences to answer the questions. Much of planning is interrelated, so something may not at first look as if it applies, but there are many ways the application questions can be successfully answered.

32. Follow the advice given on the application bulletin. Be sure to answer all the questions as outlined in the bulletin.

33. Answer the questions they are asking. Use examples. Don't use fluff words or skirt around the topics.

34. Peer review

35. Read the questions carefully and provide examples.

36. Make sure to allocate enough time to write the essays and to give previous employers enough time to write letters of recommendation/proof of job experience.

37. Application process is a little daunting, but it is good for 3 times for taking the exam so worth it.

38. Don't let the application overwhelm you; focus on 2 or 3 projects or work experiences to complete each section

39. Get your information together in advance. Submit your application during the early bird window. That way, you have the opportunity to update your submission if needed.

40. Be as thorough as possible.

41. Make sure you put thought into the application. Don't rush through it.

Advice for Future Test Takers – Complete Responses.

What advice do you have regarding studying for the AICP exam for future exam takers? (complete responses)

1. Don't rely on planning prep website. Questions were not at all like the actual test. I found the planning prep website and the AICP guide to not provide the same information that was on the test. I was actually very surprised.

2. Don't obsess about the history/time line. Questions are mostly not that detailed.

3. Do not focus overly on any subject and start early to identify your deficiencies. Take practice exams and questions and do not rely on APA material, it does little to help. The exam is not comprehensive and you can be given a poor list of questions that heavily lean to one topic or another. Do not read into questions and expect ethics questions to be much more of the exam then stated.

4. You can't study for everything on the exam, so don't get hung up on getting comprehensive studying and memorization done.

5. If you are a practicing professional don't spend too much time studying. The bulk of the questions are common sense and are logic based.

6. Purchase the exam study guide

7. Focus on what is the best answer for the particular question. Knowing how to convert acres to square feet is a must.

8. Study more than the AICP review material

9. Many things are intuitive or logical enough to puzzle through. The two things that aren't are the ethical sections and the law sections. You simply have to know the cases by name and what they are for, and you have to know the ethics well, because it's not intuitive.

10. Notecards are immensely helpful. And focus on making connections between information versus memorizing it.

11. Planetizen course was the best resource.

12. I took the Planetizen AICP Exam Preparation Course, which organized the course according to the exam topics and the proportion of questions related to each topic, which was very helpful. It also had a pre-test that helped benchmark progress and identify areas of weakness. Also, it was very clear that the exam is really meant for public-sector planners who work in planning/zoning departments. I do not feel that I would have been prepared for the exam, had I not had experience in such a work environment. I do feel like my private-sector and non-profit planning experiences were sufficient to give me the practical experience needed for many of the judgment-based questions.

13. The Planetizen study course was helpful. Try to take as many practice tests/quizzes as you can.

14. Use Planetizen's online class for $200

15. Study much more than the exam study guides that are provided by APA. Very few questions come from that material. Read Planning magazine and really understand the concepts. Take lots of practice exams. Many of the questions are worded very weird and you can tell they are trying to trick you.

16. I personally reviewed my old class notes and used both the 2.0 and 3.0 AICP exam prep produced by APA.

17. DON'T WAIT UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE!
Read multiple sources multiple times; Make flashcards of key information (it is not so much the act of memorization, but the act of writing the info down on flashcards that helps ingrain the info);

18. Start earlier than you think you need to. I wish I would have begun about 12 weeks ahead so I could gather all the resources together and organize them ahead of time - I did do this about 10 weeks before - it may sound like a lot of time is still left, but there's so much information to look over that its best to start sooner than later. Lay out a rough timeline of how you're going to study - reading/making flashcards/ taking practice exams, etc. Everyone has a different way of learning and remembering facts, so just do what works for you. Use the AICP exam study guide - I actually didn't look at this until about 4 days before the exam and wish I would have looked at it a little sooner. However, it was a good summary of all the things I had already studied from other resources (Planetizen, Georgia and North Carolina APA chapter powerpoints, etc). Make sure to look at budgeting and financial related information - luckily I looked over the AICP exam study guide the night before and happened to really study this section as I was not as familiar with some of the terms and processes. I ended up getting several questions related to this where I had to apply what I learned in order to answer the questions. So I guess just make sure to study the areas that you aren't as familiar with. The law and people portions don't come up very much during the exam, but those should be the easy questions you get right if you studied - just use the AICP exam study guide for this and then make flashcards.

19. Since there is such a broad range of information, study early and often but in small intervals. Keep up with current events in the planning world. The Planetizen online course really helped a lot. Taking practice exams probably was the best preparation because it laid out how questions were asked. It seemed that knowing HOW to take the test was just as important as knowing the information that was on the test. Be prepared for things that come up that can take away time from studying (e.g. work, sickness, a life event, etc.)

20. Four people from our office took it at the same time, so it was easier to hold each other accountable. Study your ethics, people, current trends, and Census data. I used planningprep.com to take a number of practice exams, and Planetizen has a nice course as well, but you have to pay for it. Georgia has a nice study guide and Pennsylvania does too. Most of the test is Plan Implementation and Functional Areas of Practice, but your experience will help you answer these questions. You cannot study for everything, so you just have to use your best answer. As far as the ethics section, think would the APA do, and don't consider your actual situation (politics, etc.) when making your decision. As far as the actual test: Don't be nervous! The worst part about taking the actual test is at the end. The screen goes blank for a few seconds (that feels like an eternity) and then a survey pops up. Once you take the survey, the screen goes blank again for what seems like an eternity, and then you get your score. The test is written in a weird way. For example, you need to know your people, dates, etc., but it will ask you about them in a roundabout way. One question I remember asked which case was most likely to lose an eminent domain lawsuit in court, and listed four cases as choices. Use common sense, read each question carefully, and pay attention to every question. In my case, a question late in the test gave me the answer to a question early in the test. If you studied more than 30-40 hours, you'll do fine.

21. Start studying early so that you have enough time to study the latest trends.

22. Take a preparatory class to help determine which topics you need to focus your studying efforts.

23. A lot of the questions require basic reasoning, not specific knowledge of planning concepts.

24. Have multiple study guides available and make certain to take the practice exams.

25. Invest in study materials

26. Spend more time than you'd like to on the people behind the theories, rather than just theories themselves. The exam seemed to have a bias towards the creators of ideas, rather than the ideas themselves.

27. Give yourself at least 3 months to study so you can pace it out. Last couple weeks should be kept to go through focused notes and those areas that you may be least confident in.

28. Study broadly, but deeply.

29. Vary your source of study materials. Don't just rely on one or two sources, no matter how good. My exam was vastly different then the materials I was using.

30. Study planning processes--Comprehensive vs. strategic vs. economic vs. EIS, etc. However, I was not very impressed with the exam. There was so much important information that could have been covered, yet I felt that many questions on the exam were somewhat arbitrary.

31. It is not about how long you study, it is about how you study. Study in a way that is best for you. In my case, the practice exams were the most useful.

32. It is possible to get your AICP even after many years of planning practice. In fact, I found that my experiences gave me a lot of insight into aspects of planning that I had not formally studied. Experience DOES count a lot toward practical situations you might not know on the test but are forced to guess. I found the studying hard to fit into the day while working full time, but I made it work. In the end, I am glad I did this, because it made me realize how much I love planning and how interdisciplinary the field is. I am a better planner for studying for the AICP and have found that I am using the new knowledge in my job and the community. I did not use a study group, but found it didn't matter. Sometimes that takes more time away from focused study.

33. The PDF on CD from the local chapter was very helpful. Memorize the history and law items.

34. Take it as soon as possible so the information learned in school is easier to remember.

35. Start studying early and study often. Don't get hung up on too much memorizing. Thing big picture.

36. Focus on ethics and law

37. There were questions on the exam that were not in either of the above study guides.

38. Give yourself plenty of time to study. I would also recommend taking an online course such as Planetizen as they provide guidance and great study material relevant to the test.

39. Study early and often. Figure out concepts and figure out how to pick best answer since questions had multiple correct answers. I was surprised with how much I studied; it was still a very difficult test. The second time, I felt much more comfortable taking it, though.

40. Study virtually every single case regarding takings and other legal issues. The landmark cases such as Euclid Vs. Ambler, Pennsylvania Coal vs. Mahon, Penn Central vs. City of New York, and Berman vs. Parker are not at all discussed. Munn vs. State of Illinois will be asked. Use this link as a resource: https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/misc/97-122.pdf   also use this one: http://www.studystack.com/flashcard-32462   Also learn as much as you can about FDR's new deal and the programs that were started under the New Deal. There are at least a dozen questions that cover this section. Don't bother studying any GIS because it's not really covered except know the difference between raster and vector data.   Study social justice hard. Study planning theory hard. Know the different types of quantitative research methods. Know your architecture nomenclature. There are tons and tons of trick questions and some of the nomenclature questions will not be familiar to you. The obvious questions are skipped. I graduated from an accredited college with a 4.0 and this exam is NOT designed for the faint of heart.

41. Pick a study tool like the APA AICP Study Guide or the Planetizen AICP Exam Prep Corporation and work your way through that; focus on history and law, know the AICP Code of Ethics, and focus on areas of planning practice that you are less familiar with

42. Understanding how the exam and the questions are structured was key for me. I took practice exams, then went back and studied the concepts I missed and made related flashcards. Repeated test and flashcards until it was clear.

43. The test focuses more on situations and broader concepts rather than specific data. It makes it more difficult to study for, but provides a better measure of your experience rather than your ability to memorize information.

44. The test is more about memorization rather than practical planning. Memorize methods of survey and history dates and cases

45. Use APA Study Guides, but there are some questions that were not in any of the materials

46. Think broadly.