

HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST PLANNING PROGRAM

While all accredited planning programs cover the same set of core materials and techniques, they do so in different ways. Planning programs vary greatly in the issues they emphasize, the research they foster, and the professional projects in which they engage. As a result, programs may differ markedly in the kinds of topics to which you will be exposed, the other students with whom you attend class, and the kind of educational experience you will have.

For example, planning programs located near the ocean may offer a concentration in coastal resource planning; programs located in farm states may focus on rural and small urban planning issues; those along the Mexican or Canadian border may stress comparative planning. Of course, other planning programs may offer these same concentrations in response to the backgrounds and research interests of their faculty. Individual programs also vary in the extent to which they emphasize practice in studios and workshops or in the degree to which they expose students to research and policy analysis. Some programs have established international ties; others have long worked with local communities to provide students with practical experience.

To determine the Planning Program which will best provide you with the education and training you want, decide which issues you would like to highlight in your educational program and the professional specialization you think you might want to follow. Then look at the Programs listed in this GUIDE to see which address the topics you want to cover, which provide the courses you'd like to take, which offer the experiences you seek.

You may be interested in the background of the other students in the program; for example, if you'd like to work or study for awhile in another country you might like a school which has a fair number of international students or faculty with comparative research interests. If you'd like to be part of a small, intimate program think about applying to schools with a relatively small number of students. If you are interested in research or think that you might want to go on for a Ph.D. in Planning (which would allow you to teach at a University) you might want to consider those programs that offer both Masters and Doctoral degrees.

If you are interesting in learning through hands-on experiences, try to identify those programs which offer a large number of project courses or which require a professional project (or “capstone”) report instead of a thesis to graduate. If you want to spend some time working internationally, you could select a University which has exchange programs in other countries. Perhaps you have an interest in another subject related to planning, like public health or law: look for programs with dual degrees in planning and these other fields. And, of course, you have to consider financial and other practical details—scholarships and grants, the possibility of getting a job or loans, the total cost of education, *etc.*

This GUIDE is set up to help you quickly evaluate a large number of Planning Programs by comparing the major factors likely to be of most interest to students: the course offerings and requirements, the type of students in the program, the background and experiences of the faculty, the costs of attending, and the possibility of financial assistance. But the brief entries in this GUIDE can only help you narrow down your choices—there simply isn’t enough space to tell you all you want, or need, to know. Once you have identified a number of programs which *might* meet your needs, **contact them directly!!** Start by visiting their websites if you can; then contact the Chair of the Program or individual faculty who work in the areas in which you have an interest. Most Programs have a wealth of promotional material they will be happy to send you.

Students often ask: “*What’s the best school for...*” this or that specialization. There is no one answer. The Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning has refused to rank schools because every Planning Program in the GUIDE has its own strengths and resources. There is simply no effective way to say that one school offers a better degree than another. Planning students bring their own goals, backgrounds, and experiences to their educational career—so different individuals will get very different things from any individual Planning Program. Only you can decide “the best school” for your needs, interests, and resources.