

Threatened Planning Schools: Lessons from Experience

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Prefatory Note:

This paper was commissioned by ACSP's Standing Committee on Strategic Communications for Planning Programs. Developing a greater understanding and appreciation of the circumstances that lead to threats of closure of planning schools, and of successful efforts to prevent such closures, is an important first step in developing an outreach effort to promote strategic communications among planning programs.

Introduction:

Perhaps after the denial of tenure, no prospect is more troubling to university faculty than the threat that their academic home may be eliminated by the administration. Planning faculty are no exception. What separates planning faculty from their peers in many other disciplines and professions is their relative expendability. University administrations rarely terminate departments in the traditional arts and sciences disciplines and in lucrative professions such as business, law, medicine, engineering, and computer science; nonetheless, they sometimes show less hesitation toward eliminating professional units, which generate lower alumni, contributions and fewer external grants and contracts. With fewer than 100 accredited planning programs in North America, planning casts a comparatively small shadow on the landscape of higher education. Add to this the relatively small size of graduate planning enrollments and it is not difficult to see why administrators, looking to cut costs and maximize income, find planning an inviting target.

Over the past 30 years, planning programs at institutions such as Yale, Catholic University, University of Pittsburgh, Howard University, George Washington University, and the University of Miami have been eliminated. George Washington University, for example, established its planning department in 1968 in the School of Government and Business Administration. This occurred in response to widespread civil disturbances in Washington and other cities following the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. GWU took this measure, in part, to counter its historic image as a private, whites-only institution in a city with a predominantly African-American population. As public interest in urban problems diminished during the 1980s, enrollments in GWU's Master of Urban and Regional Planning program declined accordingly. In the late 1980s a new university president arrived with priorities that differed considerably from those of his predecessor. In the face of enrollment shortfalls, internal faculty dissension, and resource needs in the School, the department was eliminated in 1993 and its tenured faculty were assigned to other departments.

Most of the planning programs terminated since 1970 were at private universities. A key reason is that such institutions -- more sensitive to market conditions and popular appeal than public universities -- are often quick to eliminate degree programs that do not stand on their own financial feet. Dependent on income from tuition, endowments, grants and contracts, private universities are more predisposed to leaving public-oriented fields to taxpayer-supported state institutions. Planning salaries have also not kept pace with private university tuition rates, and the pool of candidates applying to private universities has declined accordingly. Hence, many programs at private universities have generated only small enrollments, making them particularly vulnerable. But in more recent years, even some public institutions have taken a second look at their planning units. What follows are profiles of planning programs at three universities, two public and one private. All were threatened with termination or loss of departmental status during the past decade. Yet, after considerable tension, uncertainty and effort, all have survived. Their stories offer valuable lessons to program heads.ⁱ

Historically Black College or University (HBCU)ⁱⁱ

HBCU offers one of only two graduate planning degrees available in its state. The planning program is part of a larger unit offering both architecture and planning degrees. The planning program is overseen by a program coordinator reporting to the director of the unit. Although it has been in existence for more than a quarter century, the planning program began to encounter problems in the late 1990s. With limited resources available to the director, he sought to move a planning faculty slot to the architecture program. (Architecture was in deeper trouble than planning and the director wanted to use the faculty position to help reaccredit that program). The planning program's coordinator viewed this pressure as the director's attempt to build the architecture faculty at the expense of planning. With only three other faculty lines in the planning program, the coordinator argued that it was essential that the planning faculty retain this fourth line. The director responded that a fourth position in planning was unjustified, given the program's relatively low enrollments.

The program coordinator sought advice from the dean of graduate studies and talked to the chairs of planning programs at other universities. The program coordinator's effort to take the issue to a higher authority resulted in a rebuff from the HBCU's vice president who argued that he did not want to go over the director's head. Perplexed, the planning program coordinator considered turning to the professional planning community and to alumni for their support but decided to hold that option in reserve. The coordinator also thought about drawing attention to the program's past record of community service in the local metropolitan area but decided that that record had diminished somewhat in recent years. Meanwhile, the coordinator struggled with how to resolve the issue, with full knowledge that the director could threaten his promotion to full professor and chances for a merit pay increase.

After much thought, the program coordinator decided to place the matter before HBCU's president. This was done by presenting the president with a copy of an interim

report by PAB on the program's progress toward accreditation. The PAB report stated that an additional planning faculty member was important if the program was to achieve accreditation. The coordinator figured that the president did not want any HBCU programs to go unaccredited. He made it clear that if the planning program was prevented from filling the position with a planning faculty member, accreditation would be unlikely. After reading the PAB report, the president concurred with the program coordinator and informed the Institute's director to give the fourth faculty position to the planning program.

Since this incident the architecture and planning unit at HBCU has received approval for a new undergraduate interdisciplinary program in architecture and environmental design. The program coordinator reports that this has helped to bring stability and there are strong hopes that the unit will soon be authorized to become a school of architecture and planning headed by a dean. He gives credit to the director for instituting the bachelor's program, which acts as a feeder to the graduate programs.

The program's coordinator looks back on the incident with these words of advice for department chairs: First, focus on prevention. If the master's degree enrollment is small, seek to offer an undergraduate degree or a planning minor in another degree program. Offer service courses for other degree programs and professional development courses through certificate programs. Show that the program is making a real attempt to generate enrollments and revenue. Secondly, if a program finds itself in hot water, try to resolve the matter internally. Do not immediately "go public" when a threat occurs by marshalling alumni, the professional community, or other friends of the program. Attempts to defuse the tension internally may prevent tempers (and egos) from rising to the point where it becomes impossible for administrators to save face.

University of Tennessee

The School of Planning at the University of Tennessee offers an M.S. in Planning (MSP). It was established in 1964. Throughout most of its existence, the School was a free-standing unit and its director reported to the vice chancellor for academic affairs. In

the late 1980s the program director was advised by the provost that the days of small independent academic units was over. The School, he said, should become part of a larger unit. In 1988 the School of Planning joined the School of Architecture to form a new College of Architecture and Planning. The formation of the College coincided with the arrival of a new dean recruited from out-of-state. Over the next five years the College progressed to the satisfaction of most of its students and faculty. Then, in the early 1990s a new dean was appointed and several problems surfaced.

For years the planning faculty had been beset by a few highly visible personality clashes. Additionally, enrollments in the MSP had declined significantly by the mid-1990s. In 1995 the MSP failed to achieve PAB reaccreditation and was placed on probation. Adding further to these dilemmas was the fact that the state was still struggling with the lingering effects of the national economic recession, which brought budgetary stress at the state and university levels. At about this time the vice chancellor for academic affairs announced that he was recommending that the School of Planning be disbanded. Up to this time there had been no previous warning that the administration was dissatisfied with the School.

To their surprise the School's faculty soon discovered that the second dean of the new College was not particularly supportive of planning. An architect and relatively new to the job of dean, she expressed a preference for a program in urban design. Even though the School had managed to satisfactorily resolve all the issues raised by the PAB report within a year of notification, the dean continued to express reluctance to continue the School. Instead, she offered the tenured planning faculty the opportunity to join the architecture faculty. At this point the School dug in its heels and refused to accept her offer, arguing that anything less than a fully accredited planning program was a disservice to students.

Three strategies were implemented. First, the director mounted discussions with other university units, indicating the School's interest in transferring from the College of Architecture and Planning. Secondly, expressions of support were successfully solicited

from the heads of several planning schools at other universities. Thirdly, the School turned to its alumni. Blessed with a well-connected and active alumni organization, the planning faculty met with a number of high profile graduates of the MSP. Several alumni wrote letters to the University's president and its chancellor offering constructive comments and strong support for continuation of the School and its MSP. A delegation of six prominent alumni met with the president and received a fairly positive response. The same group next met with the university's chancellor, who invited them to his home to discuss the matter.

It was clear to everyone involved that the School of Planning could no longer find a suitable home in the College of Architecture and Planning. However, the School's earlier discussions with other campus units eventually brought an offer from the College of Arts and Sciences, whose dean indicated that she was happy to have the School. The planning faculty accepted the offer and the transfer was completed in 1998. Dissension was eased when three planning faculty retired. A search for a new School director was authorized in 1999. To date, the arts and sciences dean has been supportive, viewing the School as an opportunity for the College to extend its reach into the greater Knoxville area by applying social science knowledge to real world problems. The School has made special efforts to build linkages with the sociology, political science and geography faculty.

Reflecting on the experience, one recently retired planning faculty member offered this advice to his colleagues at other institutions: First, don't allow your program to become vulnerable to such threats in the first place. In particular, don't let internal tensions affect the efficacy of the degree program, student recruitment, or other key matters. Secondly, if the program is under threat, try to work out your differences within the institution. Though the School drew alumni into the issue, they worked very hard to avoid creating a confrontational atmosphere between themselves and administrators. Instead, faculty and alumni sought constructive dialogue, acknowledging the School's problems and seeking to reach agreement on appropriate remedies. Although the School

had “friends” in the Tennessee legislature, faculty chose not to play this “trump card,” thus rendering the issue an internal matter.

University of Pennsylvania

Penn’s Department of City and Regional Planning, part of the Graduate School of Fine Arts, recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. Although it achieved a respected status among both planning practitioners and academics throughout much of the globe, the Department began to experience problems in the late 1980s. Enrollments in the Master of City Planning program bottomed out in 1987 at 37 students. With the entire full-time faculty having achieved senior status, salaries consumed a major share of the Department’s budget. Adding to these matters was a budgeting system that left Department heads at Penn in the dark about each year’s budget. While expenses were fairly predictable, income was usually unclear. Each year the Department found itself spending beyond available resources, thus turning to the dean of GSFA for subventions to make up the difference. Deans in some other schools at Penn complained that the Department, and the Graduate School of Fine Arts as a whole, were not carrying their own load and that subventions spent on planning could be used to better effect elsewhere. While the problem was most pronounced in the Department, GSFA as a whole was conspicuous at Penn because it alone was a net recipient of subventions among all the twelve schools within the university. As a result, the administration began to view the Department as part of a larger problem the resolution of which could come only by dealing with the Department first.

By 1991 the department managed to raise enrollments in the MCP program to a total of 61 students. But in the same year a new dean took office in GSFA and the department’s fortunes changed. She objected to the central focus of the department, feeling it had strayed too far from physical planning and urban design. In 1993, apparently under orders to resolve the department’s budgetary shortfalls, she pressured two senior faculty to retire early. The provost appointed an external review committee, special faculty consisting of deans and senior faculty from other universities, to assess the

department's problems and offer recommendations. The committee identified problems on both sides, and among its recommendations was a period of receivership during which the dean and department worked together to re-focus its programs. However, the dean unilaterally declared the department in receivership. Exasperated, the department's chair resigned and was replaced by another senior faculty member.

By October 1993 the dean had circulated a letter indicating that the department had a \$300,000 deficit. This figure, which failed to take into account reasonable financial projections, deeply infuriated department faculty. As it happened, the department was hosting the national conference of ACSP in Philadelphia at the same time. During the conference, the department's chair met with several alumni to explain the issues. Subsequently, several wrote letters to the University's president, imploring her to bring order to the review and to recognize the department's towering contributions to planning education and practice. By December the dean had issued an order to the department to accept no new students into the Ph.D. program.

Realizing that there was no longer any hope of reaching a compromise with the dean, two planning faculty members presented the facts to the University's standing faculty Committee on Academic Freedom and Responsibility. The committee ruled that the dean had clearly violated commonly accepted tenets of academic freedom. The decision strengthened the hand of the Department and members sought the views of other department heads in GSFA. It became clear that a consensus was emerging that the new dean was performing poorly. Finally, a dramatic turning point was reached when a school-wide faculty meeting in spring of 1994 produced a substantial majority vote of "no confidence" in the dean. By that fall, the dean had resigned, taking her place on the faculty of architecture, and was replaced by an interim dean.

Meanwhile, as the department's troubles with the dean were unfolding, the new chair began a process of renewal. The faculty review committee had set goals for enrollments and budget expenditures which the chair sought to fulfill. Uncertainties about the future of the planning program had caused MCP enrollments to dip precipitously

during the 1992-93 academic year. But vigorous recruitment the following year brought a new crop of students, raising enrollments to about 85. The two retired faculty were replaced with adjunct faculty, thus cutting budgetary losses. By 1995 conditions had improved so significantly that the MCP program had no difficulty achieving PAB reaccreditation. In that year a national search produced a new dean, recruited from the MIT faculty, who secured a promise from Penn's president to provide new planning faculty lines. Subsequently, two highly respected senior planning faculty were recruited (one of whom was chosen to replace the outgoing Department chair), adding further depth to Penn's scholarly and professional reputation. Additionally, a promising junior faculty member was appointed in early 2000.

Over the past decade three chairs have served the department. All concur that knowing the criteria by which the department is being measured by administration is essential to avoid a crisis. Maintaining data on the number of program inquiries, completed applications, acceptances and matriculations, for example, could be crucial if a planning unit is challenged to show evidence of its efforts to maintain enrollments. Also important, they advise, don't allow the department to become a deficit operation. Through careful expenditures and revenue-enhancing activities such as grants and contracts, short courses, and training workshops, for example, be able to (at the worst) break even on the budget. A third suggestion is to develop and maintain strong collegial relationships with other chairs and faculty in your school or college. When the chips are down, their support could be priceless.

Insights

In all three cases the planning unit was part of a larger entity (e.g. school or college) which included architecture. And, in each case, the leadership of the larger entity had recently changed hands. Planning enrollments had dropped in recent years and faculty had secured few, if any, counterbalancing attributes such as significant grants, contracts, endowments, externally-funded fellowships and the like. Faced with limited resources, deans or other leaders considered or initiated measures designed to redistribute

funds and/or faculty lines to other, more enterprising, units (most often, it seems, the architecture department).

Yet, different strategies unfolded among planning faculty to address the threats. While some solicited expressions of support from alumni, the local planning community and/or planning faculty at other institutions, most attempted to avoid open conflict with the dean or higher administration. In the case of HBCU, the program head concluded that accommodation could not be found with the director and that resort to higher authorities was necessary. At Penn, relations with the dean became so fractious that a faculty majority vote of no confidence brought her subsequent removal by the provost. And, at Tennessee, planning faculty found relief only by relocating from the College of Architecture to the College of Arts and Sciences. While the travails of these three planning programs do not tell the entire story, they offer some sobering insights for current and future program heads and their faculty. Clearly, attempts to prevent threats make more sense than efforts to cure them.

Conclusion: Preventing Threats to Planning Schools

We are grateful to the informants in planning schools profiled here who have been willing to share their experiences with the larger planning academy. It is not pleasant either to air one's "dirty laundry" or to rehash painful fights for survival. But in doing so, these people have provided an invaluable service to the academy. At the time of this writing (August 2001), news is growing of a slowing economy and state shortfalls in revenue leading to university system budget cuts. These are the larger macroeconomic trends that can force institutes of higher education into restructuring and program elimination.

A key means of preventing threats to a program's existence is through communicating, on an ongoing basis, the program's contributions and value to its various constituencies. In 1998, ACSP formed the Standing Committee on Strategic Communications for Planning Programs. The committee's focus is two-fold: [1] to raise awareness among planning programs and the University community of the need to

strategically communicate with their various constituents, and, [2] to heighten University and public understanding of the value and contributions of academic programs in planning. The self-serving reason for engaging strategic communications is to ensure the survival and success of a planning program and the rewards that attend such success. Beyond this, however, is the possibility that the collective actions of planning programs in ACSP engaging in strategic communications will “grow” what is a relatively small field. Such outcomes, in the words of the mission statement of the American Planning Association, “contribute to public well-being by developing communities and environments that meet the needs of people and society more effectively.”ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ Telephone interviews were conducted with one or more faculty informants at each of the three institutions discussed. All interviews were carried out over the summer and fall of 2000. Interviewees were given the opportunity to revise the first and second drafts of this paper to eliminate erroneous information, elaborate on details, and provide suggestions for other revisions. The final draft submitted to the ACSP Executive Committee contained these revisions.

ⁱⁱ In the interest of maintaining anonymity, our informant requested that we identify his/her institution in this manner.

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.planning.org/abtapa/factsht.htm>