

AICP STUDY GUIDE

Podcast

Episode 2: It's All About The Process and The Format

And Welcome! To the second episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP Study Guide Podcast.

I'm Jonathan Miller - thanks so much for joining us again - and today, we're going to cover what comes next; after deciding to go ahead and pursue AICP certification.

The steps and timing can be a tad convoluted, so we'll start there, but we will also continue on to the application process; including the general time frames, as well as the criteria questions. But let's not get too ahead of ourselves. First, let's see if you're even eligible at this point.

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The AICP exam - like MOST professional certifications or licensures - does have eligibility requirements, and they aren't necessarily clear since they do depend on your underlying education. That said, the experience requirements are listed in years, and it is very important to note that these are F.T.E. or full-time equivalent years. So, when we say 4 years, we mean 8,320 hours. That's 40 hours a week for 52 weeks for 4 years, and fun fact; 1,680 hours short of the 10,000-hour rule. Insert a little, winky face emoji here.

Anyways, starting with the most minimal education, let's say you only have a High School Diploma; no college. You aren't going to be eligible to take the exam until you've been in the workforce for at least 8 full years. Which, I know, seems incredibly daunting.

If you have a college degree in, well, really anything that is not planning, you're going to have to accumulate at least four full years of experience. That's for any college degree by the way: leisure studies, whatever. The APA doesn't discriminate here; if planning was not the course of study, it's four years.

If you do have a degree in planning, but the institution you graduated from is not accredited by the APA Planning Accreditation Board: four years. The same goes with this one as well, it doesn't matter if it's a bachelor's, master's, grand master's deluxe: If it isn't accredited, it's four years of full-time experience for you. If your program is accredited, then a Bachelor's degree will come with three years of full-time experience. If it's a Master's degree, then it's only two years of full-time experience...

Now, the status of accreditation does matter. Let's say your institution was going through the accreditation process when you were in school. As long as the institution was accredited at the time your degree was conferred, and the institution is still accredited when you apply, you're totally good to go. You will need to submit verification of your education though, so be sure to have either...

- 1) A copy of your diploma;
- 2) An official transcript from the university where you got your degree; or
- 3) A letter from the university confirming you did get your degree and what date that was conferred to you on official letterhead. We are very official here.

I'd go ahead and get that ready ahead of time because some universities may take forever to get it to you, and you definitely don't want that to be the hold up.

So, now that you know how many years of experience you need, the next logical question then is, "What exactly counts as experience?"

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Well, unfortunately, there is no good, clear-cut answer to this. Essentially, the APA says it qualifies if it meets the APA's definition of professional planning experience.

Well, that is amazingly unhelpful: Like using a word in the definition of the same word, but whatever, they essentially define it by a set of criteria that you have to respond to later in the application. So let's look at those briefly now, and we will circle back to them later.

The APA uses three criteria to decide if your experience is professional planning experience. And those are:

- 1) Demonstrating a professional level of responsibility and resourcefulness while applying a planning process;
- 2) Evaluating multiple impacts to a community when implementing professional planning tasks; and
- 3) Influencing public decision making in the public interest.

We will cover these more in depth in a bit, but just marinate on those while we cover the rest.

If you work for a government entity of some kind - like a local agency such as a Township, Municipality, or County agency, or a regional one like a state government or regional planning commission or council of governments - it's pretty clear that your experience there should be able to qualify.

Internships also can count, but it's important to note what tasks you were performing at your internship because depending on how much B.S. work your internship had you do – and I know unfortunately a lot of places give out plenty of B.S. work to the interns - it actually may not qualify. It also won't qualify if it was part of an educational requirement. So that internship you got because it was required for your master's degree won't count here; no double dipping.

That said, more internships aren't full-time, but part-time experience does count - though it is pro-rated to a full-time equivalent. For example, if you worked part-time at say 20 hours a week for 6 months, that equates to 3 months of full-time experience. And the experience requirement is for full-time, so it's important to prorate that work out.

The AICP Guide Part 1 also talks about "non-traditional planning experience." This essentially provides a little extra leeway to allow some more outside of the box experience. Just make sure you can relate it back to those three criteria we brought up a minute ago.

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It's almost better to actually think about what doesn't qualify as professional planning experience. For example, the APA does not consider what they call "pre-professional work" as experience. This means things like setting up meetings, making a municipal boundary map, sending out public notices, etc., etc., etc.: These factors are mostly going to come into play when checking if your internship experience will qualify or not. Also, if your work is primarily in another discipline - like landscape architecture or law - it may not qualify either.

So just because you may do a small planning thing here and there, your entire experience doesn't qualify. Conversely, if you do send out public notices, but it's just a small part of what you do; your experience still will. The important thing here is to look at your experience as a sum of the parts.

Now it's not as simple as just chucking this stuff down on the application because they aren't just taking your word for it. You will need to get letters of verification for all of the experience you listed. So if you only list one place of employment that covers the whole time frame, that's one letter of verification.

You do need a letter which addresses each position separately. So, if you got promoted, well congrats, but those will need addressed separately which can usually be done in the same letter. These letters also need to be written by your supervisor, and if they aren't around anymore, then human resources, or the principal/CEO, president/partner, whatever moniker your company uses, can write it as well.

If your employer happens to be out of business or just doesn't exist anymore for one reason or another, it may still qualify. But that's on a case-by-case basis, so you'll need to contact the AICP for more direction there.

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Just make sure all letters have this information:

- 1) Your name (super important);
- 2) Your APA ID number (you'll need to provide this...to make sure you're a current APA member of course);
- 3) The position and title;
- 4) The dates you were employed (this is where they'll specify "part-time" and if so, how many hours per week on average); and
- 5) A summary of your duties.

They also need to include their own contact information as well. Here's a tip to help though: Do not leave anything to chance.

Go ahead and pre-write a letter for them. If they want any changes, they'll go ahead and do so. Remember, this is to support you in taking the exam, so you'll want to make absolutely sure that the summary of duties translates to professional planning experience.

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The next thing you'll have to do on the application is answer the three criteria essays. These essays essentially provide you the opportunity to show how the experience you verified in the previous step qualify as "professional planning experience." It's important to note - and keep in mind as we go through these - that these essays are extremely short with a very specific length limitation: Between 250 and 500 words. I promise, once you start writing these, you will very quickly run out of space.

The answers also have to be based on your verified experience, and you can't double dip your answers; like using the same event or activity for multiple questions. You can't use the information in one answer to build on for the answer in another either: each answer is basically an island unto itself.

The first criteria essay wants you to "demonstrate a professional level of responsibility and resourcefulness while applying a planning process appropriate to the project of situation."

Now, full disclosure, I hated this one the most. It's ridiculously vague and uses a lot of ambiguous descriptors. The AICP Guide Part 1 does provide some examples of planning processes and professional responsibilities, which should be the major key here. Look at your work experience and see if any of it falls under the examples of a planning process, like comprehensive or subarea plans, zoning and development reviews, project design or evaluation; that type of stuff.

From there, look at the list of examples for planning responsibilities and see which ones you do, or did, in the service of the planning process you chose. Now basically take those and write it down in a story-form so that your roles and methodology is self-evident, and be sure to make all of the connections between you, the planning responsibilities, and the planning process.

Do not make the mistake of just outlining the steps, and don't make the mistake of not making it clear that it was YOU doing these things. They want to know what you did...not what the team did or what a general step does. Just make sure you walk it through step-by-step, making the connections, and you should be fine.

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The second criterion is to “Evaluate Multiple Impacts to a Community When Implementing Professional Planning Tasks.” For this essay, you first need to identify a “professional planning task,” and then describe how you evaluated multiple impacts to a community within the scope of that task.

Again, the AICP Guide Part 1 provides some examples of a professional planning task that would necessitate evaluating multiple impacts, comp and subarea plan-making, land use or zoning reg analysis, development projects, etc. Potential effects could really range anywhere from impacts to housing or housing affordability, impacts to the environment or cultural resources, economic impacts, job growth; the list goes on.

This one is definitely more straight-forward than the last, but keep your attention on the evaluation process you went through as opposed to just the steps you took.

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The third and final criterion essay is about “influencing the public decision-making in the public interest.” This essay wants you to explain how - in your verified experience of course - you were able to influence a public decision in the public interest.

Now, “influence” can be taken any number of ways, but so long as an action you took contributed to the outcome of a public decision - like the adoption of a plan, variance or zoning permit approvals - as long as it was a discretionary project and not ministerial.

This one will be a lot trickier for private sector applicants...but there has to be a project you worked on where you provided a recommendation that was approved, or even just presented some of your research or data findings. All of those are ways that you've influenced the public decision. So when you're writing this one out, focus on what your deliverable was that impacted the decision - and most importantly - how that deliverable was taken into account and influenced the decision. You'll need to identify the specifics here as well; like what the decision ultimately was, who made it, etc.; so make sure you're concise.

I can't stress enough how quickly you can run out of words for the length requirement, so think short and direct. You don't get points for fluff language. And that's it. Easy right?

Application/Exam Windows (And Membership Status)

So, let's say it looks like you meet the eligibility requirements for experience based on your education, and you know what examples you want to use for your criteria questions so you can work those out ahead of time. What's the schedule for applications and taking the exam? Is it ongoing?

Well, no. It's definitely not ongoing. The exam is administered twice a year: in May and in November. For the May exam, your application window will be the month of December, and if you're looking at the November exam, your application window will be the month of June.

Now if you apply within the first week of these windows, you'll be considered an “early bird” applicant. All that really means is that you get your approval or denial response sooner, and have the ability to resubmit your application, which can be extremely valuable. So, I highly recommend starting the application early in order to meet the early bird deadlines.

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So, what happens when you get your application in and you get your response letter back, and you've been: Denied.

Well, all is not lost here. You do have the ability to appeal the decision, and I highly recommend you do so. Worst case scenario, you don't win the appeal. Best case scenario, you do, and your application is then considered approved just like if it were approved from the get-go.

An approval is good for three years too. So if you don't end up passing, you don't have to reapply and pay the extra application fees again; at least for three years.

When writing the appeal though, please, please, please do not be personal in it, or use any language at all that would even remotely insinuate an emotional response. Keep it clean. Keep it calm. Keep it factual, and keep it on point.

In full disclosure, my application was actually denied because of my response to criterion one. I appealed the decision, and over the course of about 3 pages or so and using logical arguments, I convinced the AICP Appeals to reverse their decision and approve my application. So just know that denial decisions can be reversed, so don't lose hope if it happens to you.

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Well, thanks again for joining us! I know all of this is a lot, but breathe. It isn't so bad, especially once you get into it.

All of the links for the references we talked about here can be found in the show notes; including links to the AICP Guide Part 1 which I definitely recommend downloading when working on your essays. Pages 24 and 25 provide some good checklist bullet points to help make sure you've answered them appropriately and adequately; and

If you have any questions that you want to follow-up on, feel free to reach out to me at theveryunofficialaicpguide@gmail.com and I'll do my best to help out if I can. Otherwise, you can always reach out to your local APA chapter and I'm sure they'd be happy to help.

Don't forget to subscribe so you can follow along with future episodes to help prepare for the exam. Till next time.

Links:

Eligibility Criteria:

<https://www.planning.org/certification/eligible/>

AICP Guide Part 1:

<https://planning-org-uploaded-media.s3.amazonaws.com/document/AICP-Guide-Part-1-Certification-Application.pdf>