

Planners for Tomorrow (P4T): Student Perspectives on the Future of Planning in Canada

by

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With special thanks to the rest of the P4T team - Stephen Bentley, Sam Bereskey, Aleksandra Brzozowski, Elana Cossever, Yvonne Hii, Terra Kaethler, Lisa Moffat, James O'Neill, and participating planning students from all over the world.

Who should be the planners for the cities of tomorrow? What should be their knowledge, skills and attitudes? How should their capabilities be developed? These three questions were the focus of an innovative year-long student-run dialogue on the future of planning. This student initiative, named Planners for Tomorrow (P4T), was designed to articulate student perspectives on the knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) essential to the future success of planning practitioners in Canada. The dialogue was fostered and facilitated through a website providing varied communication tools and various face-to-face meetings culminating in the P4T Forum at the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning, June 14-16. Through the dialogue a set of Recommendations was generated for delivery into the World Planners Congress (WPC) and World Urban Forum (WUF) that were held in Vancouver in the week following P4T. The five major Recommendations were briefly introduced in the previous issue of Plan Canada (Summer, 2006) and are summarized in Box 1. This article highlights the P4T initiative's origins and development along with reflections on the experience and the implications of the Recommendations for action by planning students, practitioners, and academics.¹

ORIGINS OF P4T

During the summer of 2004 SCARP students began to discuss how they might contribute to WUF 2006. Out of these discussions emerged the idea of focusing on how to implement what has been learned over the three decades since Vancouver hosted the first WUF about the knowledge, skills and attitudes that "planners for tomorrow" will need if they are to meet the challenges of urban sustainability. Further, it was decided that new information and communication technologies (ICTs) provide exciting opportunities to engage planning students from around the world in a year-long dialogue that could generate recommendations to be delivered to the WUF and associated forums in Vancouver in June 2006.

¹ The final version of the P4T website is available at <http://plannersfortomorrow.ca> All the P4T tools and products can be found there (e.g. Wiki to generate Recommendations <http://www.plannersfortomorrow.ca/wiki> and the full text of the final Recommendations <http://plannersfortomorrow.ca/downloads/FinalP4TRecommendations.pdf>).

A group of SCARP students formed in January 2005 to advance the planning of this proposal. In February the Canadian Association of Planning Students (CAPS) meeting in Toronto adopted the SCARP proposal to host the 2006 CAPS meeting in Vancouver, June 14-16, and to organize it as an international planning student forum that would be the culmination of the year-long dialogue and the finalization of products to be delivered to the WPC and WUF.

P4T TOOLS OF ENGAGEMENT

After eighteen months of experimentation with various ICT tools within the framework of the P4T website including computer bulletin boards, discussion salons, a Wiki, electronic newsletters, photo and video galleries, we continue to be impressed with their potentials. At the same time we better appreciate the requirements for capitalizing on their advantages and mitigating their weaknesses. User statistics for the website show an apparently impressive daily average of 299 visits involving 2114 pages by the time of the P4T Forum but they don't reveal the many challenging issues that need to be addressed in employing them.²

Cost: It is not cheap to do what was done if all the costs are included. The P4T Team were fortunate in having SCARP's newly established Cosmopolis Lab equipped with hardware and software for employing emerging ICTs. Generous funding from Western Economic Diversification Canada supported a core group who devoted long hours to customizing the tools and facilitating their use.

Expertise: Diverse expertise is essential. The talents among the P4T Team included computer systems and programming, video production and editing, graphic and web design, and multimedia software skills and experience.

Time: Large amounts of time are required to build and revise the website, pilot and refine the provision of the tools, and facilitate their ongoing use – opportunities and problems created by those engaged continuously demand prompt and effective responses.

Users: ICTs have to fit the needs, interests and capabilities of the users. These vary enormously among those potentially engaged and so strategies must include multiple options. Substantial numbers of people have little interest in the topic, let alone capacity, in using the new ICTs. Many others are interested in the topic but not the new ICTs. Substantial numbers of people are interested in both but just don't have the time to engage. Some people are attracted to the short give and take of ideas on a computer bulletin board or Wiki while others need the opportunity to express their ideas at article length. We came to understand that we needed to provide all of these options and supplement their use with traditional paper formats such as newsletters and the irreplaceable face-to-face discussions.

Facilitation: Exchange does not proceed interestingly or efficiently enough to induce widespread and sustained engagement without substantial efforts to

² Luke Sales, a member of the P4T Team made an assessment of the use of ICTs by P4T as the Research Project for his Masters Degree and created a Salon to facilitate discussion with others as he generated the product. His full report is available at <http://www.plannersfortomorrow.ca/salon/index.php?blog=19&cat=209>

stimulate and assist it. Such facilitation has to be continuing, timely and responsive in using ICTs just as with the traditional engagement tools.

Despite the challenges, the P4T experience leads us to conclude that if ICTs are appropriately designed and implemented they have immense potential to supplement the use of traditional engagement tools used by planners.

THE P4T FORUM IN VANCOUVER

The web-based dialogue was invaluable in catalyzing widespread student interest in the P4T Forum. Presentation proposals responded strongly to the encouragement to design highly interactive sessions and to include the full range of ICTs. The final program consisted of 69 presentations from 86 students, who came from over 25 planning programs in Canada³ the United States, Scotland, Italy, and Australia.⁴ In addition practitioners and academics formed four panels to lead discussions on the conference's KSA themes and there were displays of poster presentations and art by 10 other students. Over two hundred people participated during the two and half days of the Forum on the UBC campus. The rich diversity of session topics included presentations on sustainability, diversity, design, transportation, urban-rural linkages, housing, climate change, energy, food, and youth. Throughout, attention was given to the implications for the KSAs needed by the Planner of Tomorrow. Some of the most memorable exchanges took place during the pre-Forum tours of the Downtown Eastside, Granville Island and the West End and at the BBQ at the UBC Farm and the concluding Social Bash at Video Monster Lounge in Gastown.

P4T RECOMMENDATIONS & ACTING ON THEM

In the months leading up to the Forum the P4T Recommendations were drafted and revised through face-to-face discussions and using the web-based tools, in particular the Wiki. An early version was discussed at the American Planning Association meetings in San Antonio. The version presented at the P4T Forum and afterwards to the WPC and WUF was taken from the Wiki and elaborated in a print version and highlighted in a 17 minute DVD. (We encourage readers to go to the website to view the DVD version and read the full text.) In concluding this short overview we focus on two major opportunities for acting on the P4T Recommendations.

First, P4T was so well received by students that those meeting at the UBC Forum agreed to re-name the annual conference of the Canadian Association of Planning Students – Planners for Tomorrow - as part of reorganizing CAPS. The proposal from the Department of City Planning at the University of Manitoba to host the next meeting in Winnipeg in February 2007 was enthusiastically accepted. Work is already underway to pass responsibility for the continued development of the P4T website to Manitoba and to build on the Recommendations as part of the next P4T Forum. These developments bode

³ Much appreciated financial support to students for travel and accommodation from CIP, Affiliates, ACUPP, planning schools and Infrastructure Canada made it possible for students to attend from across Canada.

⁴ The full program is available at <http://www.plannersfortomorrow.ca/2006/06/p4t-forum-final-program.html>

well for advancing thinking and sustaining action by planning students on the future of planning.

Second, the recently initiated CIP Membership Continuous Improvement Project provides an excellent opportunity to begin implementing the P4T Recommendations.⁵ This CIP project is intended to be a comprehensive review of the Institute’s membership process and standards: “The National/Affiliate Membership Committee decided it was time to take a look at what it would take to be a ‘state of the art’ professional association, and if necessary, ‘raise the bar’ to strengthen the profession.” The five P4T Recommendations (Box 1) are thus most timely and highly relevant to this important task. They represent what emerging planners see as the vital issues facing the profession.

Box 1: P4T Recommendations

1. Embrace sustainability as a cornerstone of planning.
2. Recognize diversity and promote cultural competence and inclusivity in planning processes.
3. Strengthen collaboration between educational institutions and practitioners.
4. Re-evaluate the role of planning organizations.
5. Cultivate the skills and attitudes needed for the planner of tomorrow.

Recommendations 1 and 2 go to the heart of what is the vision of planning that inspires Canadian planners. The full text and materials on the website elaborate what it means to embrace sustainability in all of its dimensions and to recognize diversity and promote cultural competence and inclusivity in our planning processes. Recommendation 5 gives specific examples of steps that can be taken towards cultivating the skills and attitudes that will be required by the sustainability planner of tomorrow. Recommendations 3 and 4 address the critical roles to be played by planning students, practitioners and academics, and their various organizations and community partners, in working together to advance the “state of the art” of planning and “raise the bar” on our implementation of it. Taken together these Recommendations address what should be the substantive content and the procedural approaches to this most timely initiative by CIP. Next February’s CAPS conference in Winnipeg will provide students with the opportunity to review progress and contribute to further advancing the vision and reality of the Planner for Tomorrow.

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Bios

During the P4T initiative Tony Dorcey was Director of the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). Samara Brock was the lead student for the initiative

⁵ For information on this CIP initiative and to review a copy of a consultant’s report recommending how to proceed go to http://www.cip-icu.ca/English/member_summary.html

and Luke Sales was one of the P4T team members, all of whom were at the time Masters Degree students in SCARP.

Summary

P4T was a year-long, student-led, dialogue on the knowledge, skills and attitudes required by the Planner for Tomorrow. It was designed to generate action recommendations for the World Urban Forum (WUF) and World Planners Congress (WPC) held in Vancouver in June 2006. The initiative experimented with the use of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) to generate recommendations that were reviewed in a P4T Forum held at UBC immediately before their delivery to the WUF and WPC. The article reflects on the experience and the implications of the recommendations for action by planning students, practitioners, and academics.