



PAB Task Force on Innovation and Communication in Planning Education –

Report on the Value of Accreditation

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Planning
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I. INTRODUCTION

In its 2017-2022 Strategic Plan, the Planning Accreditation Board (PAB) identified a strategic goal to “*Communicate the value of accreditation to all constituents.*” As outlined in the Strategic Plan, this effort includes an objective to “*Articulate and document the value that the accreditation process confers to planning programs, the planning profession and other stakeholders.*” In support of this effort, the Task Force on Innovation and Communication in Planning Education—which includes representatives from PAB, the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP), the American Planning Association (APA), and a student representative—and PAB staff undertook efforts in 2019 to elicit feedback from PAB constituents on what accreditation means for the planning field.¹ In particular, the Task Force sought to define the role accreditation plays in planning from the perspective of practicing planners, planning educators and others primarily affiliated with the academy, planning students, and the public at large. From the academic perspective, the Task Force sought input from both currently accredited programs and programs that are unaccredited and/or currently seeking accreditation. This report summarizes the Task Force’s findings concerning the value of accreditation with the aim of contributing to the wider discussion of the value of planning and elevating the value of PAB accredited programs and degrees.

In order to develop these findings, the Task Force held in-person workshops at the 2019 APA and ACSP conferences to receive feedback on these issues from the academic and practicing planner communities. The Task Force and PAB staff also conducted an online survey of practicing planners, educators, and students, which incorporated concepts of the value of accreditation developed by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), PAB’s programmatic accreditor; the scope of the online survey and responses is outlined below. Where relevant, the report incorporates insight from the Task Force members based on their experiences in both academic and professional planning settings.

The report is divided into two key topic areas: (1) the value that PAB accreditation provides to academic planning programs, educators, and students; and (2) the value that PAB accreditation provides to practicing planners and the profession.

PAB Value of Accreditation Online Survey

The PAB Value of Accreditation survey was conducted through SurveyMonkey from October 1 – November 1, 2019. The survey included a series of questions soliciting feedback from stakeholders on what accreditation means for the planning field: what role does accreditation play in the field, and what value does it provide to the profession and the academy? How can PAB more effectively communicate its role? Several of the questions were adapted from survey questions concerning the value of accreditation in general that had been previously developed by PAB to meet a reporting request by

¹ The Task Force’s work on the value of accreditation followed an effort in 2018 focusing on innovation and emerging trends in the planning field and planning education, which was summarized in its Report on Innovation (March 2019).

CHEA; other questions were developed by PAB staff and the Task Force and focused specifically on PAB's role in the planning field. Respondents were provided opportunities to respond with open-ended and qualitative answers, to provide feedback that could be combined with discussions held through in-person sessions at the APA and ACSP conferences.

With the support of APA and ACSP, the survey was shared with contacts at accredited programs, students, PAB Site Visitors, unaccredited programs, and practitioners. In total, the survey received responses from 242 people. As outlined below, while the respondents were weighted toward those affiliated with academic planning programs (particularly accredited programs), there was considerable representation by non-academic practicing planners. A majority (84% of all respondents) reported that they were very familiar or somewhat familiar with accreditation and PAB.

- 82% of all respondents were affiliated with an accredited program (n=199). Of those affiliated with an accredited program 89% identified as faculty, program administrator, university-based higher administrator or a combination of these three.
- 18% of respondents were from an unaccredited program or had no affiliation with an accredited program (n=43). In this category, 60% identified as planning practitioner/employer, while 24% identified as faculty, planning program administrator, and/or other discipline program administrator/advisor. (Note: respondents were allowed to select more than one affiliation category.)
- 46% of all respondents were PAB Site Visitors. 62% of those identified as Site Visitors were educator members of the Site Visit Pool and 38% were practitioner members of the Site Visit Pool. (Note: PAB Site Visitors are found in both categories, affiliated with an accredited program and no affiliation.)

The quantified results of the survey are attached to this report in **Appendix A**. Where relevant, these results, along with the qualitative feedback collected in the survey, are described in the summary in Parts II and III.

II. VALUE OF PAB ACCREDITATION TO THE ACADEMY

The key findings of the Task Force's outreach concerning the value PAB accreditation provides to planning education and to planning programs are presented below; where relevant, qualitative feedback provided by stakeholders has been combined with survey data. To provide a comprehensive look at how PAB impacts the academy, the section below also addresses specific issues with accreditation and the challenges it creates for planning programs.

- One of the most common values of accreditation supported by stakeholders is **quality control**: stakeholders noted that accreditation standards **provide structure and the minimum basics or "floor" of what a program needs to achieve** through its standards, and that PAB's review can focus a program's efforts (for example, accreditation encourages a program to keep good data and engage in frequent self-assessment). PAB accreditation was commonly cited as an **effective external perspective and evaluation** on a program that **identifies areas of opportunity and spurs improvements to a program**
 - Among survey respondents affiliated with an accredited program, 88% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that *PAB accreditation fulfills the function of providing quality assurances of the quality of my program*; 76% "agreed" or "strongly agreed" with the statement that *PAB accreditation fulfills the function of promoting quality at my institution*.

- 67% of respondents affiliated with an accredited program, and 72% of respondents with no affiliation, “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that *the quality of planning programs nationally would deteriorate if PAB accreditation were to end*.
- Among all respondents, PAB was generally rated as “good” or “excellent” in providing assurances to prospective students, employers and the public regarding the quality of accredited programs; providing schools with the incentive for careful and thorough self-examination; and providing schools with constructive recommendations for improvement (see **Table 3** in **Appendix A**).
- Stakeholders noted that PAB accreditation **enhances the visibility of a program** to external parties. Through its connections to the APA and AICP professional associations, accreditation **provides a “stamp of approval” from the profession** that can be particularly valuable to attracting students who see it as an entry point into the profession. Similarly, the connection to the profession provided by accreditation **distinguishes a program from other planning-related fields**, e.g., geography or architecture. Notably, stakeholders from unaccredited programs frequently cited the potential for higher visibility and marketing to attract higher enrollment as a motivation to seek accreditation.
- Particularly among accredited programs, it was noted that accreditation **enhances a planning program’s visibility within its college or university**. Because planning is typically a relatively small program that shares resources with larger or more visible programs, accreditation can **strengthen potentially vulnerable programs and lead to more resources**. It was noted that accreditation is often valued by higher education administrators and can improve a program’s position in negotiating for space, faculty appointments, or other forms of support. In particular, PAB standards related to program autonomy, size of faculty, and quality of facilities can be cited when asking for college or university support.
 - While this dimension was noted by several stakeholders, the survey found that support lagged in comparison to the quality control aspects of accreditation. Respondents did not rate the following statements as highly in this area as for the other dimensions of inquiry.
 - 60% of all respondents rated PAB as “good” or “excellent” in *assisting planning faculty and administrators in achieving support for their programs* (among respondents affiliated with an accredited program: 61% rated as “good” or “excellent”).
- PAB accreditation also supports **information sharing among programs**. Through the external perspective of an accreditation review, programs gain a perspective of what peer planning programs are doing and allows them to keep up with latest developments and practices; this provides for **effective benchmarking** of a program against its peers.
 - As with the dimension of support within a college and university, the survey found that support for this dimension was generally lower than the other dimensions of value.
 - 58% of all respondents rated PAB as “good” or “excellent” in *assisting schools with information on trends and innovations in planning education, using knowledge gained through the ongoing accreditation review process*. Of respondents affiliated with an accredited program (n=210): 60% rated this statement as “good” or “excellent” and 26% were “not certain.”
- Many stakeholders affiliated with the academy noted that the value provided by accreditation is weighed against the burden that it places on programs. In particular, the benefits accreditation provides to a program are accompanied by an **administrative burden**. Program administrators and faculty, who answer to other parties within their educational setting, are given an **additional responsibility to which they must devote time, energy, and budget**. As several stakeholders noted, the responsibility to the accreditor can sometimes feel like busywork.

III. VALUE OF PAB ACCREDITATION TO THE PROFESSION

While the value of accreditation provides for the more direct benefits to planning education outlined in Part II, it is also valuable to practicing planners and the profession as a whole. In general, these benefits are strongly correlated with the value to the academy:

- In the area of quality control, accreditation acts as an assurance to others in the field, such as employers, that **graduates are receiving an education with a cohesive competency for the profession**. In particular, practitioners and employers view accredited programs highly in providing the **core for professional education** with commonly recognized standards for skills, knowledge, and values. Several stakeholders stated that accredited programs **produce professionals who are well prepared for practice** with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively serve in the workplace and with the public.
 - Among all survey respondents, 79% rated PAB as “good” or “excellent” in *providing assurances to prospective students, employers and the public regarding the quality of accredited programs*.
 - Both the Task Force and PAB staff have received feedback from practitioners and those involved in hiring planners that not having an accredited program nearby presents a challenge to attracting high-quality planners. Notably, this can be an issue for both large cities and smaller municipalities that are geographically separated from an accredited program.
- PAB accreditation was commonly noted as **supporting connections between education and the profession through the AICP credential**. This was noted both in the context of the traditional AICP process, which allows for graduates from accredited programs to qualify for the exam with a lower work experience, and for the recently enacted AICP candidate program, which is only available to graduates with an accredited degree.
 - It was also noted that students value the connection between accreditation and the credential when considering accredited programs, as AICP is a key means for professional advancement.
 - Similarly, practitioners involved in hiring planners did not find that there was a direct connection between accreditation and professional advancement (e.g., candidates for planning positions would receive a higher starting salary offer), but found that there was an indirect connection: a planner with an accreditation degree would be more likely to receive the AICP credential, which would in turn lead to higher salaries and/or promotion to senior positions. This is a potential area of value that warrants additional investigation.
- It was noted that accreditation encourages **more direct collaboration between the academy and practice** that enhances practice. This is supported by standards that **emphasize faculty service to the profession and partnerships between programs and local planners** (i.e., connections to local APA chapters, internships for students with local practitioners or planning offices, or use of practitioners as adjuncts).
 - This dimension was ranked somewhat lower in the survey than the other dimensions surveyed: 59% of all respondents rated PAB as “good” or “excellent” in *providing a vehicle for engaging practitioners and academicians in joint and ongoing deliberations*. Of respondents affiliated with an accredited program, 60% rated this as “good” or “excellent”; however, of respondents with no affiliation, only 25% rated PAB as “good,” and 50% rated this as “not certain.”

IV. CONCLUSION

As shown in the survey results and other feedback received by the Task Force, **the chief area of value provided by PAB accreditation relates to quality control.** This dimension applies to both academic and practicing stakeholders, as the assurance of a high-quality education that reflects the needs of the profession supports the supply of well-prepared planners entering the field. Similarly, accreditation (or a degree from an accredited program) serves as a marker of approval from the planning profession that distinguishes planning from other related fields.

In furtherance of its mission, **PAB would be well-served by emphasizing these dimensions in its communications and connecting them to other areas of value supported by its partner organizations.** In addition, how accreditation provides benefits to practicing planners in the area of professional development should be investigated further: for example, PAB, APA, and AICP should consider whether there is a correlation between an accredited degree and professional advancement (e.g., higher salaries) through achievement of the AICP credential. Planning programs may also consider emphasizing the value of accreditation and its relation to professional development in their own outreach and communications; for example, communicating this element may serve to distinguish a program and support student recruitment.

PAB would also be well-served to emphasize the specific benefits it provides to planning programs related to visibility. This element of visibility can be both internal (i.e., accreditation may enhance a program's visibility within the college or university setting, leading to higher levels of support) and external (i.e., accreditation may help a program appeal to a wider community of prospective students and support improved enrollment).

PAB should also consider how this value is weighed against the additional administrative burden accreditation presents to planning programs. This concern is similar to one shared by stakeholders concerning the potential for accreditation standards to reduce flexibility and inhibit innovation within planning programs (outlined in the Task Force's 2019 Report on Innovation). An area of possible additional investigation with the partner organizations is how to lessen the administrative burden and provide for greater program flexibility while maintaining the core accreditation goals and standards, particularly in relation to the upcoming revisions to PAB's standards.

Appendix A – Online Survey Results

Table 1 – Respondents affiliated with an accredited program (n=173)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Certain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
PAB accreditation fulfills the function of providing public assurance of the quality of my program	49%	39%	7%	3%	2%	100%
PAB accreditation fulfills the function of promoting quality at my institution	42%	34%	16%	3%	5%	100%
The recommendations of the PAB Site Visit team are valuable	44%	31%	20%	4%	1%	100%
The quality of my planning program would deteriorate if it were no longer accredited by PAB	24%	22%	37%	9%	8%	100%
The quality of planning programs nationally would deteriorate if PAB accreditation were to end	29%	38%	24%	6%	3%	100%
The benefits of PAB-accreditation are more readily seen in the long-term than in the short-term	9%	46%	33%	11%	1%	100%
PAB accreditation motivates my program to focus more on assessment of student learning	28%	42%	21%	6%	3%	100%

Table 2 – Respondents with no affiliation (n=49)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Certain	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The quality of planning programs nationally would deteriorate if PAB accreditation were to end	47%	25%	22%	6%	0%	100%
The benefits of PAB-accreditation are more readily seen in the long-term than in the short-term	25%	42%	29%	4%	0%	100%

Table 3 – All Respondents (n=218)

	Excellent	Good	Not Certain	Fair	Poor	Total
Provides assurances to prospective students, employers and the public regarding the quality of accredited programs	32%	47%	15%	4%	2%	100%
Provides schools with the incentive for careful and thorough self-examination	45%	35%	15%	3%	2%	100%
Provides schools with constructive recommendations for improvement	38%	34%	21%	4%	3%	100%
Assists schools with information on trends and innovations in planning education, using knowledge gained through the ongoing accreditation review process	20%	38%	29%	9%	4%	100%
Assists planning faculty and administrators in achieving support for their programs	28%	32%	31%	5%	4%	100%
Provides a vehicle for engaging practitioners and academicians in joint and ongoing deliberations	21%	38%	26%	11%	4%	100%