

AICP STUDY GUIDE

Podcast

Episode 17: What the Essays?!?

And welcome back to the 17th episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP Study Guide Podcast. I'm Jonathan Miller, and thank you so much for joining us. We are picking up today with the experience essays which are now a separate part of certification altogether; i.e. NOT part of the application.

That said, if you got your applications in on time to submit the essays - that was January 19th by the way - then starting on February 9th, you can start submitting essays for expedited review. And What does that mean? Well, that means that if they reject any of your essays, you'll be able to make corrections and send it back in. Of course, that's a little more expensive too, but it is what it is.

In this episode, Shane and Alex from Planning Certification are here to help offer some insight into these essays. They've been working with with applicants by reviewing their essays to make sure they're accepted, so they know a thing or two because they've seen a thing or two.

Anyways, without further ado.

(1:15)

JONATHAN: Shane, Alex, thanks for joining me again! How have you guys been? Whatcha been up to?

ALEX: We're really just getting people ready to take the May 2021 exam, so we're excited to see all the new applicants getting through the process.

JONATHAN: I know, it's been a whirlwind. It's nice that they actually sort of pushed back all the deadlines for all of those things, and actually separated out the essays from the actual application process. I kind of like how they did that.

So, thanks for helping sort through the essays. It looks like the questions are pretty much the same, but I remember when I was going through it. I actually did pretty poorly on it and I had to appeal mine, so let's go through these sort of systematically to help everyone keep it straight.

So, the first essay on the list - Criterion 1 - asks us to (and FYI, this is the question I had to appeal), it asks us to "Demonstrate a professional level of responsibility and resourcefulness while applying a planning process appropriate to the project or situation."

What do you think is the best way to approach this one?

ALEX: So it's kind of part of our overall day-to-day work, but it can be overwhelming to read a question like that and know where to begin. So we recommend pulling up the planning process and that's intuitive to our day-to-day work.

It's collecting data, analyzing that data, reaching out to stakeholders, developing and selecting alternatives, and implementing all of those alternatives that you selected. So, if you could see the planning process in front of you, you can kind of think of a project that fits into that method and start fleshing out in your answer how you collected that

data, how you analyzed that data, how you developed alternatives and so on and so on throughout each step.

JONATHAN: Are there any big no-nos? or anything people should really try to point out? I know when I did it, that was actually the one I had to appeal. I think it was because I didn't explain things enough, but I'm not entirely sure.

ALEX: Yeah, so the biggest part that catches people is they assume that because the review committee is made up of planners, they don't really get into the nitty gritty of what those steps are. So our biggest recommendation to new applicants is kind of pretend that you're writing to non-planners and explain every little details because that's what the review committee is looking for. They want to see how resourceful and professional you are. So instead of using big umbrella terms like "I researched the data," tell us how you did the research: did you pull up GIS data, did you do surveys. Get into the nitty gritty because that really helps the review committee see you're a good planner.

SHANE: And in the part of developing alternatives, don't just tell us you selected alternatives. tell us why you selected alternatives, that type of thing. I think people get up on this one because of the vagueness or because of the broadness of the question itself. But I think most practicing planners, this kind of fits in to what we do on the day-to-day. You just have to take a step back and realize that most of the projects we work on use some sort of planning process. So I think most everyone who's applying for the exam is equipped to answer this question pretty soundly. It's just wrapping your head around the way they ask it.

(4:47)

JONATHAN: Criterion 2 asks us to, "Evaluate multiple impacts to a community when implementing professional planning tasks." I want to say I used a subarea plan I was a part of for this question, but how would you recommend people look at this one?

ALEX: So any type of project that improves the quality of life. The thing that catches people on Criterion 2 is that a lot of planning can tend to be aspirational. Of course we want to improve somebody's quality of life by improving accessibility or affordable housing or providing them food access; whatever those broad aspirational values are. But this question is saying, 'how did you evaluate those impacts,' so how did you truly determine that that project improve the quality of life, how did you determine that would improve it at all instead of just keeping things status quo. And you certainly don't want to pick a project that would negatively impact the community. This is strictly speaking on improvement and positive consequences.

JONATHAN: Is there anything you think people should try and focus on for this particular one?

ALEX: I think as long as you can express why you think it's improving people's quality of life. So, if you're talking about improving food access for an example, that may make sense to planners with that one simple line, but the review committee wants to see how you evaluated that that would improve food access. Did you improve food access in a food desert, so that was a nutritional source that those communities did not have to begin with. Did you provide them a food option closer to home so they don't have to drive as far or take the bus as far. All of those things are improving quality of life and you want to flesh out the true realities of why you're improving someone's quality of life as opposed to just saying, "Of course, by putting this grocery store in this community it improves food access."

SHANE: Right. You want to get into the evaluation. Evaluate the existing conditions, and how did your intervention improve those conditions for that community.

(6:57)

JONATHAN: And the last one which when I took it, I worked in municipal planning and wrote plenty of

staff reports, so this one was pretty easy for me to write. I think it might be more difficult for people who aren't in the public sector. Criterion 3 - asks for an example of, "Influencing public decision-making in the public interest." What are some things to look for in this one?

ALEX: So I think that you're spot on that anyone that presents to any type of board on a day-to-day basis is going to have it a bit easier to answer this question. But, I think even as private planners we influence the public interest all the time. So for this one you definitely want to pick a project that had an affirmative decision. You don't want them to have decided in a way that countered your opinion or recommendation. The gist of this question is saying without your work, the board could not have made that decision. So you really have to emphasize how your value, your input, your research led to the board making a great decision for the community.

So, in private planning that happens by developing reports that we then pass on to our clients, and then that client presents it to the board. So you have developed this amazing plan that made it easy for the municipal planner to get it passed. You kind of cut out the middle man when you're a local planner because you're the person who is then presenting it to a board.

JONATHAN: Yeah, so you can - I don't know how to phrase this. Instead of looking at it in terms of how you directly speak to a planning commission or board, you can sort of refer to what the lynchpin points were that you had in a report that ended up influencing the board.

SHANE: That's right. It's more about your work, the research, the analysis you did that influenced the decision. And that can happen by way of a report, or presentation, or speaking directly to the board. So it's really just about how your work influenced that decision and that can happen in different ways.

ALEX: Anticipating what board need is also a really good part to include here. So, if you happen to know that one councilwoman is - let's say - obsessed with crosswalks and safe crossings to school and your project includes that kind of thing, anticipating that you have included the data in the report on the amount of crosswalks or where the crosswalks will be. That type of resourcefulness, that type of information, that is a great planner influencing the public interest because if you can satisfy that councilmembers concerns and get a board approval, then you did your job.

(9:50)

JONATHAN: So I know you've done a lot; helping people with their essay responses. What are some really common mistakes you see people make in answering these?

SHANE: We have been helping people with their responses. We actually offer an essay 1-on-1 review service where we help people craft these responses. I think a lot of times we see people - especially for Criterion 1, but really throughout - using language that speaks to the team they're working on; because as planners, most of the things we're working on is collaborative or part of a larger team. But when answering these questions, the review board - when they're reviewing your answers - want to hear about your experience, your input, your research, and so it can be kind of hard for planners to do that. It's a weird way, and it sounds a little bit lacking a bit of humbleness, but that's what they want to see. You need to be specific about your contributions. So we see a lot of people when they start out kind of writing, "Our team developed this report" or "We researched this." Even simply changing that phrasing to "I" or "my input was this" or "I did this" will provide a lot of value when they're reviewing responses.

JONATHAN: Well one more thing - to be honest I have no idea if other people deal with this kind of issue - I know I did, so I imagine someone else does to. So when I was doing it, I read the guides, and they said to elaborate on things and say this and say that. So, I started to that and I actually found it opposite of what some people would assume going in. I had a really difficult time keeping it under 500 words. I know there's the 500 word limit - and I don't how strict they are on the 500-word limit. I had an extremely difficult time even keeping it under

1,000. I had a difficult time keeping is succinct, I guess. Any advice you could give people on how to keep it succinct?

ALEX: I know the word count - I mean these are called essays - so it really throws people off. If you just start writing, you will realize you'll go over 500 words more so than not reaching 500 words. It is easy to kind of cut the meat. One is making sure that you're answering the question properly, that your answers are directly answering the question. So, you can read it and say "Is this showing me being resourceful and professional?" If it doesn't, you can strike it. There's also things like contractions. You can say can't instead of cannot; that helps. Instead of saying things like, "in order to," you can just say "to". Those are these grammatical tips that we can help in our application essay review service that helps really kind of cut that fat.

JONATHAN: Wow, that's awesome. Well thank you guys again. I know the application essay section can be daunting to a lot of people.

ALEX: Best thing to do is just start. When you're in it, it can feel like sometimes you haven't had the work experiences to answer the questions properly. But, if you step back, all of these questions are in our day-to-day planning jobs just by being a planner. So, it's really just about finding that perfect project that answers the question perfectly.

JONATHAN: I know, I had a tough time with that too. I had a hard time coming up with three different ones because I don't believe you can duplicate. You can't double dip for lack of a better word.

ALEX: You can use the same job, but you have to use a different project.

JONATHAN: Well thank you again for taking the time!

ALEX: Of course, thank you for having us.

SHANE: Yeah, thank you.

(13:59)

Well, thanks again for joining us! The essays can be a bit much, but hopefully some of these tips will be able to help you out some. If you haven't already, go on and visit aicpexam.com. It's an awesome resource for study guides and you can look into Planning Certification's Essay Review service. It helps to make sure you don't get a rejected response and have to go through the appeal process, and links to that and the APA's guide to essay responses can be found in the show notes or the podcast website.

As always, If you have any questions that you want to follow-up on, feel free to reach out to me at "theveryunofficialAICPstudyguide@gmail.com" and I'll do my best to help out if I can. Or you can try to reach out to your local chapter's Professional Development Officer. That's what they're there for.

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Make sure you tune in next week, we will pick up where we left off - and also close out - the topic of tenements with the New York State Tenement House Law, and then the subsequent founding of the New York Committee on the Congestion of Population. If you need a refresher on the tenements, go back to Episodes 9 and 12.

Thanks again everyone, 'till next time.

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