AICP STUDY GUIDE

Episode 4:
What's the Game Plan?

And welcome! To the fourth episode of the VERY UNofficial AICP Study Guide Podcast.

I'm Jonathan Miller - thanks so much for joining - and now that we know a little more about the format and overall structure of the exam, how do we go about getting ready to take this beast that - at least according to the Michigan Chapter of the APA - has a pass rate of only 65-67%?

Well, Shane and Alexandra from Planningcertification.com agreed to talk with us some more about some tips and tricks on how to structure your study time, manage your time and anxieties on test day, and just generally get ready for it so that you are in the best position you can possibly be in when you go to sit down.

(00:52)

Jonathan: Well thanks for coming on again you guys. You've been amazing and helpful, and we absolutely really appreciate it.

So, let's say someone applies for the exam - early of course - and gets the notification that they are approved to sit for the exam. Are they too late at this point in studying for the exam or should they have started earlier?

Alex: I think, obviously, earlier is better. If you apply for the early bird, which we are big proponents of, then you're going to get that acceptance letter much sooner, and you're going to have the most time to study for the exam. If you apply in the general admission, then you're going to get that 'okay' much later. So, you should probably start preparing in anticipation of a 'Yes,' hopefully, and start identifying resources you're going to use, mapping out your study time, and then kind of getting into the meat of it once you get that approval.

Jonathan: Okay, so once they've identified those resources and they know what topics that they need to focus on based on their personal experience and what they're going to be tested on, is there an approach to divvying up that time that works better than others? Like do you think it would be better to pace out the studying, or maybe set aside some full days to devote to running through the material?

Shane: We definitely recommend pacing it out so you don't get burned out, and at least, that's how we approached the exam ourselves. I think what we like to do is - at the beginning - maybe start with a practice test, or practice quiz, or review the topics i-depth and identify the topic areas you know you're going to struggle in. It really helps if you take a practice test to start with; I think I did that when I was studying for the exam. I started with a 150 question practice test, and of course, I bombed it. But I was able to identify which areas I was going to need to spend the most time on, so when I was formulating my study plan after that, I knew that even though I was pacing it out I was going to have to devote the most study hours to certain areas.

Then, once you kind of get that plan, and know what areas you need to focus on, what areas you're already solid at, you can kind of mix in different methods to keep things fresh. So

obviously, using study guides and study e-books like we offer on our website, but also mixing in flashcards, timelines, practice quizzes, practice tests, things like that to kind of keep it fresh so that you don't get burned out with your study materials.

Jonathan: So let's say, you know, an applicant does this and they've got their overall plan to approach the studying, they've marked off some small, regular chunks of time to devote to studying - like put it in a calendar like responsible people - is there a preferred way to approach how much time to devote to each of the topics that we covered in the last episode?

Alex: Yeah, so because APA does a great job at kind of putting it out there about the way the test is broken down into percentages, you know that 60% of the exam is areas of practice, and plan-making and implementation. So, just starting there, those are your big topics. You can also keep going with the rest of the big five topics to kind of isolate your studying. Then, once you get an understanding of concepts, you can really drill down to understand more of the rote memorization; so the timelines, the case law, things like that because you can understand things like 'the 1970's were a big period of environmentalism.' So when you get a question like, "When was the Clean Water Act passed?," you understand the big concepts already and you zero down and know that you're probably looking at a date in the '70's.

(04:28)

Jonathan: So, I know that when I - personally at least - was studying for the exam, figuring out how to organize all of that material in a way in a way that was - for lack of a better word - digestible was incredibly difficult for me. There's a lot of different ways you can go about it; you can do it by topic, you can do it be timeline. I was constantly torn on whether to do it that way; whether to divide it out categorically or chronologically. What's the best way that you guys would recommend to approach organizing all of that information

Shane: I think to start with, to get a general understand of the topics: Categorically, rather than chronologically. That's kind of how we organizaed our study guide that we offer on our website. You get the big five topics, and all of the information you need for each of those topics, categorically. I think drilling down on that first kind of helps you get a general understanding of everything that might be covered on the test. Once you have that general understanding, I think then you can kind of break it down chronologically, like Alex was saying, to kind of get in your mind an idea or put context around the information that's going to be asked. We offer a timeline on our website that helps with that, but once you get that general understanding categorically, then it's better to go back and break it down chronologically.

Jonathan: Let's say we've done all this. We've set aside our time. We have our approach to organizing the material and studying it. We've studied it. We've put in the hours, and we are on our way to our local Prometric testing site. Do you have any advice for anyone for how to get ready for it on test day?

Alex: Well. first off, I always think you should always eat a good breakfast and drink water. I sound like a mom, but I think it's important. And then I just want to paint the context, and paint the picture, of what someone would be walking into at a Prometric site if you haven't taken a test at a place like that before.

So when you get there, they're only going to give you a pencil and a scrap piece of paper. There will be a calculator built into the testing platform, so you're going to be able to use it that way. Then, as you're taking the test, don't second guess yourself, you know, trust that you've spent all of this quality time devoted to studying. One of the biggest tips that I remembered is - especially this came up a lot for ethics questions - even though you know what you may do when you're answering a question, remember what the test is asking you to do: What would the Code of Ethics want you to say? So it's not necessarily what you would do, it's what the best answer should be.

Jonathan: Uh, I struggled a little bit on the ethics portion specifically for that reason.

Alex: Yeah, it does catch people.

(07:14)

Well, Alex and Shane provide some really useful information here.

First things first, and we have preached this over and over again: Apply early. This really can't be stressed enough. Doing so will help you get a response much sooner, and subsequently will allow you to get started studying early as well.

Second, do what they suggested and try and plan out a study schedule so you don't burn out early. A good place to start here is to - as Shane mentioned - take a practice test. A practice test right off the bat will help you judge what topics you should start with, where you need the most help, and where you don't need to devote as much time.

From there, make sure you look into different techniques and methods of studying so you don't get bored and lose interest by doing the same flashcards, or the same reading over and over and over. Spice it up a bit!

And make sure you revisit the test content breakdown and - if you need - refer back to the last episode to make sure you know how much of the exam is going to be devoted to your weaker, and stronger areas. Then, you can start with your weakest areas that take up the largest share of questions, sticking with a good categorical breakdown.

Keep in mind as well, as you're working through everything, to focus on the best answers. You will come across some questions on the exam where a couple choice will seem right - and for the most part - they may be, but one will be better than they others. So, definitely work on honing the ability to sniff those out.

(08:57)

Jonathan: So, as a final for question you, Shane, since we got to hear from Alex last time: What advice would you give a young planner at their beginning of their career?

Shane: So, the advice that I would give young planners out there starting their careers is to try, as much as you can, to get information and skill and experience in a wide range of skills for planning. So for context, when I started out, I really got focused on GIS work and I think I kind of got stuck in this map trap, and I kind of want to caution young planners of being too focused in one area that they might find particularly interesting at the beginning. But to kind of take the beginning of their careers and use it to gain experience on all ranges of projects and all types of work within these projects. That way later on in your career, you're able to do more work, and be pulled in on other projects because you have such a breadth of experience.

Kind of similar is if you're a NEPA planner at the beginning of your career, maybe you don't - unless, maybe you're passionate about that and that's what you want the rest of your career to look like - but I think if you drill down on that too much you can kind of get stuck in a rut, and be too niched. So, I would definitely advise young planners to kind of explore all fields of planning or all different experiences they can get within their job.

Jonathan: That's really good advice. I actually, I ran into that as well earlier on. I did transportation planning, and once you have done that for four or five years, it is difficult to get into a position that is not exclusively transportation planning.

Alex: It makes you more hireable to know more things.

Jonathan: Right? Absolutely. Well, thank you guys. It was great having you join us for a second time; we really appreciate it. You've been just wonderfully helpful through this.

Shane: Well, thank you for having us.

Alex: Thanks for having us.

Jonathan: Take care.

(10:54)

Well, thanks again for tuning in. You guys are rockstars.

As always, all of the links for the references we talked about here can be found in the show notes. If you have any questions that you want to follow-up on, feel free to reach out to me at theveryunofficialaicpguide@ gmail.com. no spaces.

Thanks again to Shane and Alexandra for being extra generous with their time and joining us again to talk about some tips on prepping for the exam, and how to chop up our study time, and where to focus our attention. If you haven't already, really be sure to check out their website, www.planningcertification. com. It really is a great study resource that structures the information in a very digestible form.

Also, go ahead and subscribe to this podcast so you can follow along with our future episodes, help prepare for the exam and like always, supplement your other study regimens.

Make sure you tune in next week as we finally get into some of the material you may, or may not I suppose, see on the exam.

Thanks again, till next time.

Links:
www.planningmi.org/aicp
www.planningcertification.com