

# **An AICP Success Story**

## ***(or, the Year AICP Ate My Life)***

By Megan Lehman, AICP

The following are my personal reflections on the year-long experience of applying for, studying for, and taking the Comprehensive Planning Examination, otherwise known as the AICP Test, which I passed in November 2012. Overall, the process held great value and I have no doubt that I am a better professional planner for having gone through it. I rediscovered my love for planning theory and developed a richer sense of the history of our profession. I learned (or re-learned) valuable knowledge about areas of planning in which I don't currently practice, making me a better-rounded, more versatile professional and better prepared for future advancement. Yet in many ways, this experience felt like a hazing, with sometimes-arbitrary hurdles to jump to be admitted into an exclusive club. I hope that my successful experience, which could in many respects be considered "doing it the hard way," and the thoughts collected below can help some future test-takers to prepare with greater confidence and efficiency and keep their stress and anxiety to a minimum.

### **Deciding When to Test**

For some, how quickly you "get your AICP" won't matter much, but others are in a hurry to do it in the earliest possible testing cycle because they need the designation to qualify for promotions or a salary increase. I think it is very important that you be in the right place in your personal and professional life before you even begin to study for the test. **It is a major commitment.** This cannot be taken lightly, because each time you test and fail, you lose money and confidence. I think it is best to wait until you are sure you are ready, and then devote as much time and energy as possible toward passing the first time. Once you are approved to test, you have four testing cycles to actually take the test, so there isn't much harm (other than tying up your \$500 application fee) in applying and then holding off a cycle or two before you schedule your test.

APA publishes a chart which will tell you how many years you have to work full-time in planning before you can apply to test, based on the highest degree you've achieved. If you have any questions about how your education or previous experience will count in their system, it is best to contact APA staff directly to get a ruling before you put up the time and money to apply. When I contacted APA I usually got a quick and decisive answer. The more advanced your degree and the more planning-relevant your education, the fewer years you have to work before you can apply to test.

At least, that's how it's supposed to work. I was frustrated by this system because in APA's eyes, my master's degree in urban affairs and public policy with an urban and regional planning concentration was judged as being no more relevant to the profession than, say, a bachelor's degree in criminology or music. The actual number of planning courses you take means nothing. I felt that APA saw me as a second-class citizen because my graduate program was not an APA-accredited program and the word "planning" wasn't in the title of my degree.

### **Applying to Test**

The application is how APA decides if you are worthy to be allowed to take the test. The application itself is a significant amount of work, and should be a fairly straightforward process, but for some people, unfortunately it's not. You will write a series of essays proving that you are working as a professional planner with a significant level of responsibility. You also have to prove your education and employment history, which could be more difficult than you think, since there are some fairly rigid rules that can and have tripped up fully qualified people.

Consult the APA testing bulletin PDF, but also read the information listed on the web page itself. At the time I first applied, there were some inconsistencies between the two sources, as one had been updated and the other had not. In particular, the advice about whether to mail or upload your verification materials conflicted, so I went with the old-fashioned snail-mail method. This came back to bite me later, as I'll explain below. When in doubt on any point, just call APA, or better yet, get their advice in writing via email if possible. That way if you have a problem, you can refer to the email to prove you did what you were told.

As early as possible, start gathering transcripts and employment verification letters. Have these sent directly to you so that you can scan them and upload to the APA website. Be sure that the employment verification letters have the exact information APA requires to the letter. I suggest drafting a letter with all of this information and send it to your past and present employers with your request. I recommend using the template that APA provides. Be sure that your current employer's letter clearly states that you are still employed there. Someone in my office had a horror story of being rejected because their current employer's letter did not explicitly state that they were still employed there, and it affected how APA calculated her years of work experience.

Don't wait until the last weekend to start working on the essays (like I did). I spent a lot of time (12+ hours) writing and editing the extensive set of essays required to demonstrate my planning experience. I had to complete one set of essays for each of the two jobs I was counting toward my 4 years of experience. At the time, you had to complete six essays for each job, at a max of 500 words each essay. So I wrote nearly 6,000 words. Under the new rules beginning with the November 2012 testing cycle, you "only" have to complete four essays for each position you are counting. I feel bad for people who change jobs every year or so—that's a lot of essays to write!

## **Application Decision**

I originally applied for the May 2012 test, submitting my application in January 2012 on the last day (apparently most people wait until the due date to submit the application!) I attended the PA Chapter's excellent prep session and studied here and there in my free time, but I didn't go all out while I was waiting to hear a determination on my eligibility to test. For some reason I had this nagging feeling there would be some screw-up and I would be rejected. I checked the APA website regularly and my application was listed for a long time as "Pending." Then it was changed to "Incomplete," and against my better judgment I didn't call APA to find out what was going on, because the testing bulletin clearly stated NOT to call and intervene during the application review process.

Then one day I checked the website and it said "Rejected." I was livid, because I had sent every piece of documentation together in one envelope, and even had a signature receipt to prove it was delivered to their office in Chicago. I called APA and spoke to a staff member, who discovered that someone had misfiled my academic transcript and then ruled my application as incomplete. I was able to get a complete refund since they admitted it was their error, even though the testing bulletin states that all decisions are final and no refunds are given. This was an extremely frustrating experience, to say the least, but the staff member I

spoke to was very helpful and apologetic. He offered to have my application reconsidered, but at that point it was too close to the testing window and I declined.

I reapplied as Early Decision in June 2012, and in July, I was approved to test in the November 2012 window. Applying was much quicker this time since I already had the essays done. However, I was agitated to find out that that they had changed the requirements since I first applied. For each job, two of the essays I'd carefully written were no longer required. Since it was APA's mistake that I was denied the first time, I called and asked if I could just submit all the essays I'd already written as they were. I was told no, and in fact, the additional essays would not be considered even if submitted. So I had to do some rewrites in order to get all the information boiled down from six essays into four for each job.

## **The Study Process**

I did not have the benefit of a study group because no one else in my area was preparing for the test. I had to do everything on my own. It would have been good to have a support group and I encourage anyone who has the opportunity to collaborate with other test-takers. I think that going it alone was somewhat comfortable for me, as I usually tended to work alone in school, but at the same time I missed the opportunity to learn collaboratively from others and the emotional camaraderie that comes along with working in a group. I had no peer group by which to gauge how well I was doing, either, which made me especially nervous.

After being approved to test in July, I began studying again in August whenever I had free time, which didn't add up to much time, to be honest. I resumed studying in earnest about 10 weeks before the test, making the test my top priority. I began to clear out my personal obligations as much as possible to preserve study time. I cut way back on household responsibilities (TV dinners are your friend, and cleaning the house can wait). I cancelled a trip to see my parents and my friends only knew I still existed via Facebook updates about how much I was studying. I tried to do at least one or two fun things with my husband each week, whether it was seeing a movie or going for a hike. Our DVR, mail, periodicals, etc. piled up and were ignored. The point of this is to say, be prepared to have a very different quality of life in the few months before the test! Honestly, I can't imagine doing this with children unless I started studying much farther in advance and set a rigid schedule for myself to get out of the house and study for concentrated periods of time.

About a month before the test I had a legitimate panic attack because I was sure that at that point, I wouldn't pass without a lot more preparation. I had to decide whether to defer until May or do the best I could and hope to pass. After speaking with my very supportive supervisor, I decided to push through and make an all-out effort. I couldn't imagine having this hanging over my head for another six months after starting the process in January. So I logged 80 more study hours in the last month before the test. Although my supervisor encouraged me to carve out some work time to go to the library and study, I really didn't do it because work was extremely busy with several projects in critical phases at the same time (which, combined with my studying every night, was less than ideal for my overall mental health). I went into the office on the weekends for 4-6 hour study and practice test sessions when I found it difficult to concentrate at home. Even though I was studying like crazy for weeks on end, there were times when I just stopped for a day or two because I was working extra hours with night meetings or work travel, or just had to take a mental break and do something else.

My graduate planning classes were certainly a good basis for my study preparation. My program at the University of Delaware was very heavy on early planning history and theory, such as Garden Cities and the City Beautiful, and also in emerging trends and topics, like Smart Growth, New Urbanism, multi-modalism,

sustainability, and universal design. Ironically, I had somewhat of a “donut hole” in my knowledge about conventional mid-twentieth-century planning processes, but the PMPEI classes I took earlier in the year helped a lot with that. (PMPEI is the Pennsylvania Municipal Planning Education Institute, a collaboration between Penn State University Cooperative Extension and the Pennsylvania Planning Association; courses in community planning, zoning, and subdivision/land development are offered around the state each year: <http://extension.psu.edu/land-use-planning/pmpei-course-information>). Being four years out of school, I had forgotten much of the information I’d learned in classes. Luckily, it’s easier to re-familiarize yourself with names and concepts than it is to learn from scratch.

### **Test Format and Study Strategy**

Remember, the test is multiple choice, so the correct answer will be on the screen—you just have to be able to identify it, not produce it out of thin air. Anyone who is a good standardized test taker has a huge head start because it’s all multiple choice. You must choose the “best” answer where there are often multiple answers that could arguably be correct. This is definitely a test where your ability to get inside the head of the test writers and think about the test in a strategic way is beneficial. Many of the questions require some factual knowledge with a sense of professional judgment and ethics. They do a good job of writing multi-layered, complex questions, often without one clear-cut answer.

Some people who had taken past versions of the test had a lot of advice for me that I took with a grain of salt (such as “you have to memorize hundreds of court cases in detail”), knowing that the test had been revamped since they took it. I was correct in my assumption that the information received from the PA Chapter was the most on-target as far as what I should be studying. Still, their suggestions kept me on my toes.

Here are some things that did NOT appear on my test:

- Many history questions at all.
- Questions requiring you to recall specific dates or other “rote memorization” facts.
- Questions that require you to know detailed numerical information that I tried to memorize, such as lane widths, Census data, the number of parking spaces per square foot of different types of land uses, etc.
- Questions that ask very detailed information about court cases (the law questions I got required a basic understanding and covered the most important cases that come up over and over again in the study materials).
- Questions that required knowledge of specific recent projects or developments in various cities.
- Difficult questions requiring an encyclopedic knowledge of the Code of Ethics.
- Questions that try to trip you up by very slightly changing information between the answers.

I mention these things because some of the practice tests asked a lot of these kinds of questions, and the real test didn’t. Keep in mind, though, everyone gets a different mix of questions, so as the expression goes, “your mileage may vary.” The testmakers have a pool of hundreds of questions, and each test is generated by selecting a certain percentage from each content area (the percentage breakdown is available to read in many resources, including on the APA website). For example, there may be a pool of 25 or 30 questions on ethics, and since 5% of the test questions cover ethics, you’ll only see 7-8 of all the possible ethics questions. In other words, you’re not going to get the same version of the test your friend got.

About 30-35% of the questions I got were in a format where the test gives you four potential numbered alternatives (1-4), and then the answer choices (A-D) are various combinations of those four numbers. I offer the following simplistic example:

Which of the following represent modes of transportation?

- 1) Bicycle
- 2) Kiwi Fruit
- 3) Airplane
- 4) Sir Raymond Unwin

Choose one of the following answers:

- A: 1 and 3
- B: 2 only
- C: 1, 3 and 4
- D: 1, 2, 3, and 4

I came up with the following strategy on the fly during the test for dealing with these questions. It was extremely helpful, and I am confident it resulted in me getting more questions right and getting through the test faster. Here's what I did: I made a little chart

	1	2	3	4
A	x		x	
B		x		
C	x		x	x
D	x	x	x	x

on my scratch paper that showed how the lettered answers corresponded with the numbered answers. It took about 20 seconds to make a chart for each question. I scanned through the numbered answers to see if I knew for sure any were right or wrong. As I was able to eliminate any of the numbered answers OR confirm that one was definitely correct, I was able to eliminate lettered answers. So if I knew for sure that a (1) bicycle was a mode of transportation, I could eliminate any answers that did

NOT include number 1. So I crossed out row B. Then, if I knew for sure that (4) Sir Raymond Unwin was not a mode, I could eliminate any answers that included number 4—so cross C and D out. That leaves me with only one potential correct answer—A—in two quick steps. I would then quickly review all the answer choices to make sure I didn't miss anything obvious, and moved on to the next question. Using this method, there were some questions that I was able to answer correctly very quickly through process of elimination, even when I didn't know if some of the numbered answers were right or not.

These questions with both numbered and lettered answers can get a little confusing, especially on a 3.5 hour test, *especially* when some of the questions are phrased in negatives (such as “which of the following is not...”). Even though making the chart might seem like an unnecessary waste of time, trust me—just try it.

### Study Materials

Overall, the test measures your professional judgment and breadth of knowledge. This works to the advantage of someone with a good general planning education and a variety of professional experiences; it makes it harder for someone who goes in-depth in one area, such as just transportation or housing or environmental planning. My over-arching advice is to read widely and focus on memorizing the general information about the most commonly-mentioned court cases, planning forefathers, historical events, etc.

The vast majority of the questions do not test rote memorization, but rather your familiarity with the information and ability to apply it using professional judgment.

Following is a list of study materials I used and how helpful I thought they were. I was able to get all of these from my office's library or borrow it from the PA Chapter, so I actually spent no money buying study materials, which was fantastic. I am a slow reader, so others may be able to get through the same material and more in less study time than I logged. I definitely spent too much time slogging through some of the denser sources in great detail and attempting to memorize and test myself on rote facts.

**AICP Exam Prep 2.0:** This is published by APA and is the “official” test prep guide. I think this is the single most essential resource you’ll come across, but by no means is it going to give you everything you need. The chapters cover different general topic areas (environment, economic development, housing, etc.) with information presented in bullet points, so it can be read quickly. It’s got lists of important names, court cases, federal laws, vocabulary, and more. Read it at least twice and try to memorize a lot of it. It would be highly effective to organize most of the information in the book into flash cards. The downside is that it’s a top-level survey of material and in many cases does not give enough information to really understand the significance of some of the people or court cases. In some places I found it to be sloppily written. One good strategy is to use it as a source for names or court cases that you aren’t already familiar with, and Google for further reading. Sometimes I found that a Google Image search helped the most with design-oriented questions (i.e., you can read endless descriptions of how a dumbbell tenement was laid out, but quickly looking at a few historical pictures or floor plan drawings is far more helpful). I also found several important things were missing from this book, so again, this isn’t the end-all and be-all. But it is extremely helpful, especially at the beginning of your studying, to give you a good introduction to the type of material likely to be covered on the test. The practice test in the back of this book was helpful, although the format of the questions was too simplistic and didn’t resemble most of the actual test questions, in my opinion.

A **CD-ROM** comes with this guide and you can rent the PA Chapter’s copy. The CD-ROM contains three practice tests with 50 questions each—so, basically, one full test. I think some of the questions were repeats from the back of the guide book. The utility of the CD as a practice test is limited, but you should go through it anyway since it’s the only source of current “AP-official” practice test questions. The format and questions on the CD are simpler and easier than the actual exam. Do not be fooled into thinking the test will be this easy. The CD also contains a lot of great study information, such as APA policy guides and the code of ethics. Definitely take some time to read through this material.

**LanPlanPrep Version 1.0 CD-Rom:** Our office had a copy of this CD, produced by Datachem Software, Inc. I have no idea how old it is (at least 10 years old), but it was definitely created for an past version of the test. It contains 3 or 4 full-length, timed practice exams. I found a lot of the content to be irrelevant to the material that was actually on the test (for example, way too many questions concerned sourcewater protection, and it asked about court cases I’d never heard of elsewhere), but a lot of it was helpful. More importantly, of all the resources I found with sample questions, this was the practice test that most closely replicated the actual format of questions on the AICP test. If you have access to a copy of this CD, I think it’s worth going through just to practice taking full-length tests with complex questions like you’ll see on the exam.

**2011-2012 Chapter Presidents’ Council Study Manual:** This is basically a supplement to the AICP Exam Prep 2.0 guide with a whole lot more information that I found very useful. It’s available from various state chapters at a cost of around \$20 for an electronic copy. I printed mine out so I could highlight and make notes. It is updated every year or two, but I reviewed two years of the manual and it barely changed, so if you can get a

“newer old” copy from someone for free, it’s probably fine. It really filled in a lot of the gaps in knowledge for me and connected the dots between the long, narrative information in the Green Bible and the short, bullet-point information in the 2.0 guide. The Manual also contains some helpful study strategy advice. I think this resource is essential and should be read in its entirety once, then referred back to for review in the last week or two prior to the test. The Manual has useful charts such as the ITE Parking Generation data that I couldn’t find anywhere else without having to buy additional, expensive books.

**Green Bible:** The famous “Green Bible,” properly titled “The Practice of Local Government Planning” and published by ICMA, contains 461 pages of planning wisdom that shouldn’t be ignored. I think it was most useful for those questions that ask you to weigh on your professional judgment and decide the “best” course of action among several potentially correct answers. It really gives you the long view of our profession and provides a sense of wisdom and how to balance competing interests. The book is revised and re-issued every few years, and there are MANY copies floating around from various years that all have roughly the same cover. So make sure you get the most recent edition that was published before the test you’re taking. (When I took the test, there was one newer edition that came out after the version of the test was written, so obviously I studied the older one). I started reading this book a bit late in the process and got through about the first 300 pages before running out of time. I highly recommend starting this book early and reading 10 or 20 pages a day, every day. It’s a compilation of chapters written by different authors, so some are more readable and enjoyable than others. Some chapters have a lot of useful illustrations, while others are endless blocks of dense text. The nice thing is that each chapter is a different topic and there’s a lot of variety in subject matter, so if something is a hard slog for you, just skim through for the highlights and then move on. I got way too bogged down and could have easily finished the book in a month if I’d taken this approach.

**Practice Tests on <http://planningprep.com/>:** This source has 12 full-length practice tests. I found it to be helpful in gauging my level of knowledge of history and law, especially, and topic areas such as transportation and environmental planning. It was also helpful in practicing to take 150 questions in a row without stopping. I took each test and then immediately went back through and read every question, answer and explanation. Then I took the test again to lock in the information. This source helped me identify things I needed to research further, such as names or court cases I’d never heard of that came up as answers. But don’t get hung up on some of the really detailed questions (as mentioned above). They also seemed to get a handful of recent news questions from Planning Magazine that were quite silly and unnecessary. (Did they really think the test would ask us the original prototype name of the Segway?)

**Everyday Ethics for Practicing Planners (Barrett):** I ran out of time to read this book, but having just skimmed through it quickly, I would recommend reading it. I think it would help with a lot of questions that test your ability to make a professional judgment call, not just the straight-up ethics questions (of which there are few on the test, anyway.) It doesn’t seem like it would take a really long time to read this book and it seems less dry than some of the others.

## **My Experience on Test Day**

I had scheduled my test for the afternoon of the very last day of the testing window, since it was a Monday and would give me one extra weekend to study. The night before the test, I studied until 9 p.m., watched “The Walking Dead,” took a melatonin to help me sleep, and went to bed. The next morning, I left at the time I would normally go to work and drove to a coffee shop near the testing center, where I got an early lunch and did my final cramming.

I showed up at the Prometric testing center near Harrisburg a half hour early as instructed. I signed in and had to leave everything in a locker. They take security very seriously! I got wanded with a metal detector and had to turn my pockets inside out and push my sleeves up. You can't even take your own tissues into the center; they'll give you tissues if you need them. The testing center has cameras in the ceiling and a proctor walks around periodically and just stares at everybody. Luckily they do let you sign out to go to the bathroom down the hall and go to the water fountain if you need to during the test.

The testing center was one big room with probably 30-40 carrels, in a small office building with some other businesses inside. People appeared to be taking all kinds of other random tests (from the quick glances of curiosity I took at other screens while walking in and out). The test center employees sit on the other side of a big glass window. When they opened and closed the door to the testing room I could hear a lot of noise, including loud talking in the waiting area, even while wearing the provided noise-cancelling earmuffs. Someone came in and out of the testing room every few minutes. I had a seat right by the door and I found it extremely distracting. If you are easily distracted, ask to be seated away from the door. The person seated in the carrel opposite me kept kicking it and shaking my table, and when the testing center door opened and closed, the walls shook. In other words, it was a pretty cheaply constructed facility. I would recommend dressing in layers so you can adjust for your temperature preference and bringing your own set of earplugs if noise bothers you.

During the test instructions, I wrote down the number of questions and the time allotted and made a note of what time I should be  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the way done,  $\frac{1}{2}$  done, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  done with the test. I referred back to this later to make sure I was ahead of pace so that I would have some time to go back through the marked questions at the end. I went fairly slowly and took time to consider each question, answer and re-read it again. If I was really baffled by a question I didn't dwell on it for too long since I needed to cover a lot of ground to get through 170 questions. I marked many questions that I wasn't sure about. I also kept checking the clock against my notes to see if I was on pace. Several times I just took a 30 or 60 second break to stretch and move around in my seat a bit to get my blood flowing.

I got through the entire test with about 40 minutes left. I took a quick bathroom break and then started going back through the questions. I actually changed several of my answers, mostly in the first third or so of the test. This made me really nervous because I thought I must have really screwed up badly if I was changing my mind so much! In reflection, I think that I was still "warming up" when I started the test. By the time I went back through to review, the things I'd read or considered in the later questions came back to bear on some of the earlier questions. My time ran out when I had reviewed about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the test, so I did not get a complete review of the marked questions.

When your time runs out, the screen goes blank for about a minute, and then you take a survey. I tried to answer honestly, but I really raced through the survey because my heart was beating out of my chest and I just wanted to get my result! When I hit submit on the survey, it took another minute or two and the screen was just blank while it was calculating my result. I was horrified thinking that maybe the computer crashed and lost my test. Finally, the result popped up and I saw the word "Congratulations" and my score in a longer paragraph about how the test results should be interpreted. It took me a second to realize I'd actually passed and I spent a few minutes reading and re-reading the screen, thanking God and trying not to cry.

I went out to the desk and asked the staff to print out the results page for me. They don't do this automatically, but I was really glad I got a copy. When I got out to the car I let go and just sat there and sobbed, so overcome with emotion, most keenly RELIEF that I had passed and the entire ordeal was over! I

felt a sense of momentous freedom. Not only had I passed, but I had done so by what seemed to be a wide margin, and now my (non-work) time was my own again! I started calling people, first my husband, then my supervisors, and my parents. I think the most enjoyable part was being able to tell the people who had helped and supported me and listened to me complain for months that I'd finally passed.

### **Interpreting the Results**

I scored 71 on a possible range of 25 to 75, with 55 being a passing score. I think this means I did very well, but APA doesn't tell you what those numerical scores actually mean. I have read that some questions are weighted more heavily than others. But my guess is that since there are 150 "real" questions on the test, and a 75 is perfect score, then your numerical score is approximately half of the questions you answered correctly. So I probably answered around 142 questions correctly, out of 150 "real" questions.

Note: The info in the preceding paragraph does not include the 20 experimental questions which will appear randomly throughout your test but don't count toward your score. So keep in mind your test will actually be 170 questions. It's not easy to know which ones are the "real" questions, but you will guess at some. I only saw one or two questions that I was sure were experimental. One asked about something called "power centers" which I'd never heard of. Just keep in mind there are experimental questions so that if you get a question on something you never heard of in the course of your studying, it doesn't rattle you.

### **Life after the Test**

I thought I would want to have a big celebration the night after I took the test and do a lot of drinking, but I was just tired, happy and relieved. I just felt like having a good meal and watching TV! When I got back to work the next day, I got a lot of hugs, and our Planning Director took me to lunch to celebrate. It really made me feel like all the work I'd done, all the hours I'd spent alone studying, was being recognized and appreciated.

It took about ten weeks after the test for me to receive my official letter confirming I had passed the test and the dues statement which must be paid before I could become an official AICP. Since I took the test on the last day of the window and the results appear instantly, I was surprised it took that long, but apparently this is the norm. I heard that back in the day, before the test was computerized, you had to wait until you received notification by mail to get your results. If you passed, the envelope would be addressed to Jane Smith, AICP. One person told me that although they'd passed, APA forgot to put "AICP" on their envelope, and they practically went into hysterics until they read the letter inside!

Being able to put letters after your name is pretty cool, and you'll get a lot of support and recognition from colleagues outside your organization. I am looking forward to the official AICP certificate so I can hang it on my wall, too. Most of all, it's about the satisfaction of knowing that all your hard work paid off, and you're better prepared for future professional challenges and new opportunities as a result.

Would I go through this all over again? Yes, absolutely, as long as I knew I would pass! I would certainly do a lot of things differently, so I hope this narrative helps you to more wisely embark on a successful AICP journey.