

Response to Planetizen Opinion Piece on CM

By Monica Groh

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The initiation of Certification Maintenance on January 1, 2008 was a milestone for the planning profession and today, barely two months into the program, almost 200 providers are offering 3,500 activities for CM credit. This program is a significant change from the previous volunteer continuing education program. As always with change, it is a learning experience for everyone involved.

I'd like to take this opportunity to clarify some questions about the program.

Prior to adoption by the AICP Commission in April 2007, numerous discussions were held and research conducted to best formulate a program that would meet our members' needs and those of providers. These surveys, discussions and two rounds of member and provider feedback lasted from late 2005 through April of 2007.

As part of the extensive staff research work in support of the AICP Commission's deliberations during that time, we contacted several organizations with professional certification programs, including those representing architects, attorneys, landscape architects and CPA's. This helped us gain an understanding of how different programs were organized and operated. It also provided insight into the growth and development periods different programs have gone through. We continue to actively engage organizations in conversations about their continuing education programs.

For example, the American Institute of Architects (AIA) is now in its 14th year of its program. We have been told that their program evolved over approximately the first five years, before reaching a somewhat stable program as now administered. While we do not expect a five year evolutionary period for CM, it is reasonable to expect that the program will continue to evolve for at least three years, or to a point that we are halfway through our second two-year reporting cycle.

In the area of fees, for example, here is a comparison with the AIA's requirements. The AICP "entry fee" for providers is \$95 and includes two credit hours. The AIA entry fee is \$650 for non-profit providers and \$3,300 if the provider is a for-profit entity. In this comparison, AICP is less expensive than AIA up to 66 hours of courses for for-profit providers and up to 13 hours for non-profit providers. It should also be stressed that AIA is a Trade Association, not a research and educationally chartered organization as is APA. Our structure and development of CM is in accordance with our non profit educational status.

As we expect the program to evolve, this will likely include the evolution of the fee structure as well. While the current fee structure works for many providers and the fees are considerably less than those of some other programs, we realized that the fee structure does not meet all needs. This is the reality of trying to accommodate providers who are as diverse as our members.

We have found the fee structure to be a challenge for many providers who offer training for little or no registration fee, such as small non profits, in-house training, and some federal agencies. Multi-day workshops designed for very few attendees also do not match up well. There are other events that historically bring in few

planners, such as scholarly societies (ACSP and the associations of geographers, sociologists, etc), that would have little incentive to offer CM credits with the current fee structure. We would like our members attending these events to be able to claim credits for appropriate sessions. Nonetheless, providers can register and test the success of the program without committing resources at a level they feel uncomfortable with. The Commission is committed to keeping the entry barrier very low; thus, the \$95 initial registration fee is far lower than those of many organizations.

Exploring Alternatives

For these reasons, we are actively exploring alternative fee models that will offer providers a chance to choose the fee system that works best for them. This may include flat annual and daily fees, capped per credit fees, and a variety of premium fee packages that will offer advertising and marketing incentives. This is a work in progress but through continued dialogue we are confident that we can find a way that providers of all types can participate in this program. It should be stressed that the CM program is adding value to providers both by providing a standard for quality and by listing providers so that our 17,000 members can locate the many choices on our website. As noted, those number more than 3,500 and they are growing weekly.

Universities as Partners

As part of our work, we have also continued to work with the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) and have implemented many ideas and suggestions from those conversations. Conversations are continuing and more changes will be forthcoming. A year ago, Sue Schwartz, Immediate Past-president of AICP, and Paul Farmer, Executive Director and CEO, met with the deans and department chairs of nearly 75 planning schools at the ACSP Administrators' Conference. Sue and Paul addressed the entire gathering and also worked with the ACSP Task Force on CM. Changes were made in the draft CM program requirements as a result of those discussions.

At the ACSP meeting in Milwaukee this past fall, Paul Farmer met with the ACSP Board and others in attendance at the board meeting (about 50 people) and discussed the program, ongoing educator concerns and possible changes. Paul also met with the ACSP Task Force, with about 15 people in attendance. Many educators were surprised to learn about the differences among the schools in terms of state laws and university administrative regulations and it was agreed that APA would work with a small number of schools identified by ACSP that would serve as models and represent the range of differences identified in our discussions in Milwaukee. Those conversations are continuing and we expect that alternate fee proposals will address many of these diverse needs.

Engaging Providers is a Top Priority

Since the AICP Commission approved the Certification Maintenance program last April, a team of marketing, outreach, and AICP staff has contacted and met with more than 700 training providers from around the country to encourage them to register as CM providers. These include providers who participated in our voluntary Continuing Professional Development (CPD) program as well as providers suggested to us by our members. Often these efforts have been fruitful, once staff has the opportunity to walk through the program details and explain the registration process. This often reduces misconceptions about the program and allows staff to

help the provider brainstorm how CM can work within their training model. We have found that our conversations with staff of potential providers often dispel fears and clarify our program. Providers sometimes think that CM has been around for years and we have just started charging providers. Others may think that all of their courses would be eligible and quickly calculate a number that is much higher than a more accurate figure. When we explain the details, we've had providers conclude that one or two additional AICP registrants would cover the fee. They have often concluded that marginal revenues from additional attendees exceed the marginal costs.

A Few Examples

For a modest conference of 86 attendees, 24 CM credits offered and a \$175 registration fee, only seven more registrants would be needed to cover the \$1,195 CM fee. For a conference of 291 attendees, 42 CM credits offered and a \$260 registration fee, only eight more registrants in addition to the 291 would be needed to cover the \$2,095 CM fee.

A two-day, 12-hour workshop that charges \$425 per registrant will need two additional registrants to cover the CM costs. Even with a cap on attendance, it's not an unlikely possibility. Our own 14-hour PTS workshops saw a 76 percent increase in attendance last fall, from 78 to 137 total participants for the four courses. For Planetizen, or any similar training provider, to register one of its four-hour online courses (\$99 per course) for CM credit, it will need to bring in just two additional registrants per quarter. Its CM fee would be only two percent of revenue for 100 attendees. With more than 17,000 AICP members looking for training, it's hard to understand how such providers will be priced out of the market.

Bottom line: many providers see this as an opportunity rather than a burden. Consider, for example, Lorman Education Services (a nationwide provider) has registered more than 90 seminars and workshops for CM credit, many of which fulfill the mandatory law requirement. The National Charrette Institute has registered more than 20 activities, including a 10-hour advanced Planner Certificate, available in communities across the United States. RedVector.com, a leading provider of computer based training, has registered numerous online courses that will be available for AICP members for the entire 2008 period. ESRI has communicated its enthusiasm for CM and has begun registering courses, with many more to come.

Every provider, including APA, has to register and meet the review standards set by the Commission. This is a valued service to our members and we will continue to strengthen our offerings. But APA alone cannot fulfill the needs of all 17,000 AICP members – this is neither realistic nor advantageous for the planning profession. We encourage *collaboration*, *partnerships*, and *creative solutions* to fill this educational need. This is the recipe for success of this program and will only make our profession stronger. Planners value a credential that is on par with those of similar professions.

Can we promise increased attendance? No, we can't. No organization administering a certification maintenance program can. But what we *can* promise is that 17,000 + professional planners are actively looking for relevant, high quality training; many of which did not do so in the past. Consider that less than 2,000 AICP members participated in the voluntary CPD program – that's an 750 percent increase in demand. And the number is growing – more than 1,000 planners registered for the

May 2008 exam. This is the highest registration AICP has ever experienced. Young planners are hungry for the knowledge and training that will help them tackle new challenges, and this program was created to facilitate this.

Establishing Standards and Criteria

The recent opinion piece in Planetizen states that the CM program is being operated under unfair approval procedures. This is simply untrue. All providers, including APA and its chapters and divisions, must follow the same registration and fee procedures, and CM credit is not awarded automatically for any event. Decisions are based on a clear set of standards and criteria set forth by the AICP Commission – criteria by which every activity is judged. We encourage providers to take a hard look at this set of criteria and decide what training events are and are not appropriate for this program, and how the educational objectives meet the needs of planners with at least two years of experience. It is the AICP members *themselves*, and not APA/AICP, who will be the ultimate judges of whether or not a provider offers value to the profession. Through our online rating system, members will have the opportunity to share comments and ideas (and critiques) about training events. We hope providers will benefit from this as well.

Challenges Ahead

The ideas outlined above are just a starting point. We as an organization must work even harder to engage those providers who are currently not signed up to ensure that members will be able to find opportunities that best serve their own professional development needs. These will be met by the growing list of providers of increasing diversity of offerings – diverse in topics, geography and delivery mechanisms. We are committed to making this program work well for members and the communities they serve.

AICP President's Message By Graham Billingsley, AICP

January 1st was a milestone for the planning profession. On that day, AICP officially began its Certification Maintenance (CM) program, which requires members to engage in professional development in order to maintain their certification. This program was much needed, but at the same time it was a risk, but a risk worth taking. The continued health of AICP is dependent on a meaningful credential. CM is one of the steps we are taking to build on the heritage of certification.

AICP members have demonstrated a commitment to high standards of professional practice. By staying up-to-date with the latest planning tools and techniques, AICP members advance the quality and integrity of the planning profession. By formalizing that professional development in our Certification Maintenance program, we enhance the credibility of the planning profession. At the time of the approval last April, the AICP Commission made a commitment to listen and make changes as they were needed. In hindsight we are comfortable this was the best way to do this, create the program and amend as needed. Without actual experience, all the efforts would have still led to an incomplete result. Through member feedback, with two rounds of formal feedback from AICP members, and significant input from academic members, the Commission made many changes to the proposed program in response. We continue to listen and intend to act on what we hear. Yes, this process

is frustrating to some, but it is similar to writing a new zoning code. Rare is the code that needs no amendments.

In creating the CM program, the AICP Commission discussed at great length how to pay for the program. We agreed that the cost of administering CM should not come from a member dues increase, or from an increase in member fees. We believed unanimously that the program should be paid for by the education providers including APA and its components, and that it must relate directly to the total costs for implementing the program.

We are committed to working with education providers to make the CM program a success. For those that become a registered CM provider, AICP's 17,000 professional city, rural, suburban, and regional planners will look to their training programs to fulfill the CM requirement. The CM program is a great way for providers to reach a huge audience of professional planners interested in training programs—and a way for us to ensure that AICP members can find top-quality training programs.

So far, nearly 200 providers have registered more than 3500 activities. Since the AICP Commission approved the Certification Maintenance program last April, staff and Commission members have contacted and met with more than 700 training providers from around the country to encourage them to register as CM providers and submit their activities for CM credit. We want to ensure that available training opportunities cover a variety of topics but also are delivered in a variety of formats from online training to seminars and workshops.

As other professions have discovered, some potential providers may either not know about the program or choose not to participate, so members have been asked to help us recruit more CM providers by e-mailing staff at CMproviderinvite@planning.org about training providers, or downloading a fact sheet from our website to pass along to favorite training providers.

Also, we are reaching out to officials and professionals who hire and work with planners to encourage them to hire AICP-certified planners and support the professional development of their planning staff. This marketing of the credential is important to the continued success of AICP planners. The formal commitment to continuing education that Certification Maintenance represents is a central part of the message we're sharing with those colleagues. We're showing the people planners work with every day—and the people who might hire a planner tomorrow—that the four letters after a planner's name signify expertise, credibility, and dedication to ethical practice.

Planners now join the ranks of professionals that have continuing education requirements—attorneys, architects, accountants, and others. Certification Maintenance is now demonstrating our credibility to the public officials, citizens, and colleagues who rely on us—and advancing the quality and integrity of the planning profession.

The Certification Maintenance program links certified planners to training opportunities that will keep them up-to-date with the latest trends, technologies, and best practices. When providers register, we'll let AICP members know about their CM-approved activities in our online directory of CM providers and in our online calendar of events.

The benefits of becoming a CM provider include expanded listings on APA's online calendar of events, inclusion in the online directory of registered CM providers, use of the CM logo in marketing and promotional materials, feedback from attendees offered through our automated rating mechanism, and partnership opportunities with APA Chapters and Divisions.

Every provider must pay an annual nonrefundable \$95 registration fee. We want to keep the entry fee as low as possible. Additional fees are assessed based on the number of credits for which each activity is eligible. The annual registration fee includes two CM credits. Additional fees are required for each activity submitted for CM credit beyond the two included credits. The \$50 per additional credit fee covers activity review, marketing, outreach, and database costs. The Commission will be receiving reports from staff on alternative fee schedules that may better suit certain types of training. Our hope is that we can develop a flexible fee schedule that will encourage non-APA providers to offer their training as part of the CM program.

Education providers should visit our website to learn more about calculating CM costs for your activity: www.planning.org/cm. They should also continue to have a dialog with staff and the Commission about issues as they come up. We're here, and we are listening.