

Innovations in Public Involvement
Structured Interview Report
Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning's
Future Leaders in Planning (FLIP) Program

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What it is: Future Leaders in Planning (FLIP) is a free leadership development opportunity offered to high school students in the Chicago metro area to encourage them to get involved with planning a better future for the region. Participants learn about planning programs and opportunities in the region, share their thoughts with other teens from nearby counties, and work to develop and implement real initiatives. Participants also meet and interact with selected regional leaders who make key planning decisions in local communities. Below are some images from the 2013-14 FLIP yearbook.



Interest to NJTPA: Many focus group participants cared most about planning for the future in regard to their own children. Participants also encouraged NJTPA to reach families via schools. A youth-centered program opens the door to contacting families via school systems and engaging teens and parents in issues that might not otherwise catch their attention.

Major Takeaways:

1. **Brings the planning field to a younger audience:** Young people are typically unfamiliar with planning. Many are not even aware that the field exists. The FLIP program aims to immerse high school students in the range of issues and projects that are dealt with in all areas of planning.
2. **A learning experience, but also an opportunity to make a real impact:** The program is an educational exercise, but is also devised in a way that gives students an opportunity to contribute to real-world projects. By showing students that their participation can result in tangible change, the program encourages them to continue their involvement in planning initiatives (and perhaps return to the program the following year).
3. **Program network expands year to year:** The database of contacts grows as each session brings in new students from new schools. The growth of that network results in more effective outreach and more applicants, but may also lead to a need for a more selective application process.
4. **Requires significant organizational effort but minimal costs:** Conducting outreach, putting together a new curriculum, and coordinating the program takes time. However, it is mostly run by existing agency staff members who volunteer their own time outside of work hours. This keeps costs limited to providing food for participants, subsidizing transportation, and a few other minor expenses. The program manager is an agency staff member who is paid for his/her efforts, but a very small percentage of his/her work hours is dedicated solely to FLIP.
5. **Make adjustments needed to maximize participation and ease the burden on staff:** After a series of trial and error sessions, CMAP adjusted the structure of the program to meet the needs of all parties involved and maximize participation. Some of the changes included holding the program during more convenient times, such as during the summer, during weekdays, and starting sessions after rush hour.
6. **Utilize existing agency networks to develop sessions and for recruitment:** CMAP recommends basing the curriculum on current agency projects and partnerships. This results in a program that reflects current, real-world issues and makes it possible to engage outside entities without having to provide incentives. This approach also minimizes the burden on program staff, since they don't have to start from scratch. An agency's existing relationship with schools, external committees and other organizations can also be a resource for recruitment and raising awareness of the program.
7. **Encourages staff volunteerism:** A core group of CMAP staff volunteer their time outside of work hours to run the program. They also hold information sessions about the year's

upcoming program at agency offices and encourage other staff members to sign up for volunteer positions that require less of a time commitment. Engaging these additional volunteers helps the program run smoothly and is a way to promote volunteerism as a part of the agency culture.

8. **No hard and fast measure of effectiveness:** As with many outreach strategies, it can be difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. Feedback is solicited from both the participants and the staff after each session to improve the program from year to year. However, the true impact of the program may lie in encouraging young people to pursue planning-related careers, an impact that is invaluable but also often impossible to measure, at least in the short term.

Discussion:

How did the FLIP program start?

In 2010, we adopted a regional comprehensive plan called GO TO 2040. Prior to that in 2007, during the development of that plan, one of our main goals was to involve local youth. We decided to run a pilot project to encourage students to think about scenario planning and having them share their vision about what they wanted the region to look like in 2040. So it did not start as a program, it actually began as a way to get youth to inform the regional plan. The first session culminated with student recommendations for the plan, but we recognized that the concept could be useful beyond that.

Due to the success of the pilot, our board decided to approve packaging it into a permanent program of the agency. We are now going into our tenth session in nine years. We have graduated over 350 students, many of which have gone on to pursue careers in planning or similar fields and are making impacts in local communities. The benefits have been very positive, and although it operates on a volunteer basis, it is critical to the work that we do.

How do you go about doing outreach to get students involved? Is there a selection process?

In regard to staff, this program operates on a volunteer basis, (aside from a staff lead, who dedicates a very small amount of paid time to act as the project manager and coordinate the program). Because of this, one of our challenges is not having the capacity to get out and do face-to-face outreach at schools and other institutions to spread the word about FLIP. However, we have built upon the agency's existing relationships, such as various working committees that hold monthly meetings at our offices, to spread the word for us once the finalized application is ready to be promoted. We also advertise online and in the agency's weekly newsletter. Additionally, we bring FLIP materials to many different public meetings that CMAP hosts or

participates in. Basically, we take advantage of existing agency programs and structures to do promotion. However, each year our database of contacts expands as new students participate, so our network is constantly growing. This very helpful in allowing us to do effective targeted outreach.

Thus far, we have not had any issues with recruitment. That said, it's a young enough program that we have not yet gotten hundreds of applications for a single session. The most we have received is 45 applications, and we have enough capacity that we have been able to invite all applicants to participate. However, we have noted that accepting a higher number of students presents some challenges in terms of being able to do really in-depth engagement. We estimate that the optimal session size would be 25-30 students. Eventually, as the program grows, we will have to develop criteria for a more selective process, but we're not there yet.

The area CMAP serves is large and diverse. Do certain areas or demographics tend to be more represented in the program than others? Do you try to target any specific type of students?

We want the program to be as fully representative as possible. We have changed the format of the program significantly to make it more accessible to all students. We used to hold the program during the course of the academic year and meet in Chicago at 9am on Saturday mornings. However, this limited us in regard to the number of partners we could work with (because many places were closed), and it required that our volunteer staff come in and work on their days off. Further, it discouraged students from areas outside of Chicago and Cook County because some students would have to leave their houses at 6am to be on time. In 2015, we restructured the program to run during the summer on weekdays and start a bit later (10am) to avoid rush hour. After making these changes, not only did we receive more applications because students have greater availability in the summer, but we also received more applications from areas that are further away. Additionally, we were able to attract more agency staff to volunteer their time. Every year we do a demographic snapshot of the session, and we keep track of that information so we can pinpoint gaps and focus our outreach to target those missing demographics.

How do you develop a curriculum for each session?

Every year the theme is different. We try to align the curriculum with existing work and projects that the agency is doing. For example, a few years ago we received a grant from HUD to help a community revamp its comprehensive plan. One major issue in that community was that there were no sidewalks near its schools. We had our students hold a stakeholder meeting and do focus groups with students that attended those schools. The program participants developed recommendations and presented them to the county, some of which were actually

implemented. To that end, we try to identify projects in which students can see that it is not just a learning experience, that they are really making an impact.

Generally, how is the program structured?

We are still exploring to figure out an optimal format. Last year we held the entire program over the course of one week, Monday through Friday. Having all the sessions back to back was exhausting for both the students and us. There wasn't enough time for the students to digest all of the information. To prevent that, this upcoming year we are holding the program over two weeks in July, Monday through Wednesday both weeks. We will see how that works and continue to improve for next year.

This year we have six sessions that run from 10am to 4pm. The first session is an introduction to CMAP so the students can begin to understand the role that MPOs play. We also provide a general overview of planning themes and concepts. The middle four sessions focus on planning at four different scales: Site, neighborhood, municipal, and regional levels. The final session is a day for final presentations in which students can present what they learned and also their ideas to our board of directors, their parents, and representatives from local community groups. We present the students with certificates of participation, which is a nice way to wrap up the program. We are also planning to invite previous participants to have a larger audience than we typically have (around 120 people).

In total, students put in about 38 hours, which includes a 2 hour orientation before the program for the participants and their parents so that they can become comfortable with commuting to our office and have a good idea of what the program will entail. The parents also sign permission slips and waivers and are given time to ask questions. The 38 hours are applied towards the community service hours that are required to graduate from Illinois high schools, which is an added benefit to participating.

Do you have a system in place to obtain feedback from students? Or keep in touch with them after the program concludes?

In terms of immediate feedback, we distribute an evaluation survey for students so we can get their suggestions and hear about what they enjoyed. However, we also hold a debriefing session for our staff so we can continue to evolve the program, which has been invaluable.

We haven't yet established a system for keeping in touch with our alumni, but we are looking to do that now because the network of graduates is in the hundreds and growing each year. We have a Facebook group that most students join so that they can maintain their own network, and this could serve as a way for us to get in touch with past participants.

How does agency staff get involved?

We have a core team of five FLIP volunteers and the program director (myself). We meet regularly to plan the curriculum, put together the sessions, and work on recruitment. Once we have the program finalized, we host an information session at our office so the rest of the staff at the agency can see what we are planning and sign up to volunteer on a more limited basis and fill in the gaps wherever we need extra help.

Have you had any difficulties in getting organizations, businesses, etc. to host sessions?

No. Our main issue was running sessions on Saturday because they were held during non-business days and hours. We tend to seek out companies and groups that CMAP has connections to outside of FLIP. For instance CMAP has been doing a lot of work with O'Hare Airport, so it was an easy transition into asking them if we could bring our students out there for a field trip. The key has been tapping into existing partnerships so that we don't necessarily have to provide incentives to participate. In fact, there are some groups that reach out to us because youth involvement is a part of their organizational goals or they want the work they are doing to receive more exposure.

Are there any examples of projects FLIP students have worked on that have made tangible impacts?

Yes. One project CMAP worked on was developing a sustainability plan for the village of Park Forest, which ended up winning an APA award. The plan was complete and identified a number of action items the community should take on. We got out FLIP students involved by meeting with various boards and directors of different municipal departments to discuss the plan and collect their thoughts on what to include. Also, the students put together a community sustainability fair that consisted of workshops, presentations, and information kiosks. Nearly 100 residents showed up and learned about practical ways to implement sustainable living approaches.

What kinds of people do you bring in to speak with the students?

It varies over the years. One year we met with former Mayor Daly in his office. Last year we put together a panel of planning professionals including non-profit representatives, municipal planners, private consultants, and a planner from an international planning agency so that they could see the entire scope of options that planners have if they pursue that career. Depending on the workshop we are doing, the guest speakers can vary significantly. The key is finding someone of some authority who can help them understand major planning initiatives. We also tap into CMAP staff because there are many experts here involved in large-scale projects.

Do you have any specific recommendations for an agency considering creating a program like FLIP?

Try to build on existing work that your agency is doing. It makes devising a curriculum and scheduling workshops/tours/etc. much easier because you won't be starting from scratch.

Also, at the end of the day, this is meant to be a learning experience for the students. We don't expect them to do homework or have a major completed project by the end of the program. Keep the deliverables simple and reasonable.

It helps to have a budget. We do provide food for the students at no cost and provide financial assistance on a need-basis for transportation costs.

When starting a new session, the most important part is the orientation because that is where you set the expectations and get a firm commitment from both the parents and students. Also, for many students, this may be the first time they are travelling to Chicago alone, so having a trial run with their parents helps prevent any hiccups on the first day.

Finally, holding the program during the summer, spreading the sessions out over two weeks, and starting it a bit later to account for rush hour were very positive changes to the original format.

Do you ever have students return to the program?

We do. In fact, we have had a few students who have done it all four years, freshman through senior year. Since the program is totally different each year, students can come back without worrying if it will be totally repetitive. Also, when students return to the program, we have an opportunity to give them some added responsibilities and take on leadership roles among the rest of the students. However, as the program grows and we get more applications, we may be limited in the number of returning student we can accept.