CAROLINA PLANNING

PLANNERS’ FORUM

2011 OUTSTANDING PSO AWARDS

Best Practices

Pecha Kucha Internship Presentations
Student Government

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Best Practices

Planners’ Forum, the student planning organization of the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) at UNC Chapel Hill is submitting the Pecha Kucha Internship Presentations for consideration of the APA Outstanding PSO – Best Practice Award.

Planners' Forum advocates for the interests, needs, and concerns of the students. Through several sub-committees, Planners' Forum envisions, organizes, implements, and evaluates various departmental initiatives including educational speaker events, career support, and community service. Planners' Forum also works to strengthen DCRP's relationship with other academic departments and student groups at UNC.

The Pecha Kucha presentations were planned and executed entirely by students from Planners’ Forum. These events gave first-year students an opportunity to hear about the types of internships that DCRP students get, and allowed second-years to share their summer work experiences. The presentations were very well attended by students, faculty, and staff in the department.
Description

Planners’ Forum, the student government of the Department of City and Regional Planning (DCRP) at UNC Chapel Hill, organized its first annual “DCRP Speaks: Summer Internship Pecha Kuchas,” a two-part event in which 16 students shared their summer experiences. The Pecha Kuchas (pronounced peh-chaw kuh-chaw) were hosted on September 8 and 15 at UNC Chapel Hill. “DCRP Speaks” introduced first-year master’s students to the range of summer opportunities in planning and helped second-year students reconnect after a summer away from campus. The execution was relaxed, efficient and even entertaining. Moreover, the event was a rare opportunity for a substantive number of students to present original work.

But wait, what is a Pecha Kucha?

A Pecha Kucha, DCRP-style, is:

• One hour of 5-minute lightning talks delivered back-to-back using PowerPoint decks that are short, sweet and image-oriented.
• Active audience participation using handheld placards with comments like “Brilliant,” “Only the Greatest” and “Captivating.”
• Run like an open mic session. No one person dominates the spotlight.
• Fun. The ideas can be half-baked. The delivery can be informal.

Speakers were introduced with five-word biographies, like “banjo-picking Southern Lost Boy,” “omniplanivorous girl from New Jersey” and “always running, outspoken Land User.”

The events exposed the breadth and depth of the cohort’s interests. Students had flown, driven and taken transit across the country and world to engage in work on affordable housing policy in Miami, Florida, integrated transportation reform in Bogota, Columbia, and energy planning for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina. Other interesting talks included “A Political Power Analysis of California's Central Valley” and “Will online civic engagement reinvigorate participatory planning or will it simply kill town hall meetings?”
Process and Success

The concept was introduced and organized in twelve days, during the first weeks of the fall semester. A Planners’ Forum student brought the idea back to DCRP from a summer event hosted by OpenPlans for planning interns in New York City. Other students joined to garner student interest in both speaking and attending, to advertise the events to the University and to provide facilities and refreshments. The frictionless planning process and execution reflects the high level of student engagement in Planners’ Forum’s and healthy camaraderie between students and faculty.

Forty percent of the second-year cohort (16 students) presented at “DCRP Speaks,” and more than thirty fellow students, faculty and members of the UNC community attended each event. The events succeeded in building community for the department and in giving returning students an opportunity to speak publicly about their work in an engaging format. Professors were also keen to see the material students had produced outside of class. All participants were grateful for the exposure to new ideas from friends and, in many cases, future professional contacts.

The “DCRP Speaks” format is a novel way for young practitioners to gain exposure to a wide range of topics in a participatory environment. Moreover, the talks each ended in something akin to stand-up comedy, just before the five-minute bell. Planners’ Forum has committed to making “DCRP Speaks” an annual event. Further, Planners’ Forum is organizing a faculty Pecha Kucha for the spring semester. Like the student event, the spring edition will be a platform for sharing research and new directions with students and peers in a setting that is both casual and conducive to creative thought.
To:  
The APA Selection Committee  
Pecha-Kucha Best Practices Award

Dear Colleagues,

I am an Associate Professor in the Department of City and Regional Planning at UNC Chapel Hill, and am writing to recommend our wonderful student group, the Planner’s Forum, and their many creative initiatives including a widely attended and very successful Pecha-Kucha event around internships for this year’s Best Practices Award.

The Planner’s Forum at DCRP has long been at the forefront of innovative student activity in the department, but this year they were exceptional in planning and executing a very important and very successful event around sharing and diffusing the learning generated by students’ summer internships. Internships have always been important for the department – both as a way to expose students to the workplace and to reveal key connections to them between planning instruction, planning theories and planning practices on the ground. In the past students have benefited enormously from these structured internships, but the benefits have largely been individual. Many of the students got their Master’s thesis ideas from their internship experience and many more received job offers from the organizations where they interned.

An enduring dilemma for us however, has been how to find ways to share this collective knowledge so that students could learn from each other’s experiences, become exposed to diverse organizations in the planning field, learn about the kinds of contemporary planning practices and problems they are engaged with and how plans are implemented on the ground. A second concern of ours had been how to institutionalize the transfer of this knowledge between cohorts. To capture some of this information we have tried to conduct an internship survey every year and maintain an internship database. While this database has helped, students learn about organizations that offer planning internships, a lacuna always remained.

It is in this context that the Planner’s Forum this year came up with a very innovative event organized around the idea of an internship Pecha-Kucha. A pecha-Kucha is an informal gathering of listeners and participants where a group presents a set of ideas in short 5-6 minute presentations with a small, select deck of powerpoint slides that are visually oriented and engaging and yet convey the presenter’s core arguments and substantive ideas with clarity. The audience participates by holding up placards with
words that signal their interest and appreciation (‘brilliant’ ‘good point’) or with brief questions (‘elaborate’). No single person dominates and everyone gets a chance to speak. It is a wonderful way to share information in a collegial and fun way.

The Planner’s Forum hosted its Internship Pecha Kucha in September 2011 in its inaugural ‘DCRP Speaks’ series. In hour long meetings over three days sixteen students, or about 40% of the returning class, shared their summer internship experience with each other, with first year Master’s students, faculty, as well as students from departments outside DCRP. These meetings were held in the student lounge after classes, from 6 pm – 7 pm. I personally attend one full evening of presentations, and thoroughly enjoyed learning about the highly varied experiences of the students, and many interesting planning problems their organizations were working on. That day students spoke about: housing policy in Miami, Florida, integrated transportation reform in Bogota, Columbia, and energy planning for the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina, and how civic engagement can reinvigorate participatory planning or whether it will supplant town hall meetings.

The entire event was not only innovative and very well planned and executed, but the entering class gained tremendously from the insights that were shared. Indeed, the Pecha-Kucha turned the ‘information’ that our internship surveys used to collect and turned it into knowledge – just what we want our students to learn to do as future planning professionals. This event also became an important tool for students to learn how to make good, short, persuasive and clear presentations and how to get their points across with clarity and parsimony. This communication skill is exactly what we want to teach our students – it is a crucial capability that they need to inculcate for their future careers. Finally, the experience gave students an opportunity to learn how to carry out effective team work, and taught them the value of being self-motivated.

The DCRP Speaks Internship Pecha-Kucha was not only an exceptional success, but it became a pilot for the Planner’s Forum for future innovative activities. For example, for next year the students have already planned a student-faculty Pecha-Kucha where faculty will share their ongoing research.

The Planner’s Forum merits recognition for their remarkable creativity and for the creation of public conversational space within the department that spans cohorts as well as faculty and students, and which has helped add to, and reinvigorate the department’s intellectual life. Please consider DCRP’s Planner’s Forum for this year’s Best Planning Practice award.

Thanking you,

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