Outstanding Planning Student Organization
Best Practice Award Submission

Student Planning Organization (SPO)
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
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Application Description

School/Department/Program/Student Organization
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC)
Department of Urban and Regional Planning (DURP)
Bachelor of Arts in Urban Planning (BAUP) and Masters of Urban Planning (MUP)
Student Planning Organization (SPO)

Student Representative
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Submission Category
Best Practice

Description of Organization’s Activities

The Student Planning Organization (SPO) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is a student group under the Illinois chapter of the American Planning Association. Our goal is to facilitate educational, professional development, and social events for urban planning graduate and undergraduate students. SPO strives to offer a wide variety of opportunities for all students to get involved, whether that is on campus, in the larger Champaign Urbana community, across the Midwest region, or at the state and national levels of the APA.

In the past year, SPO has supported professional development through trips to Chicago and Cincinnati, giving students opportunities to learn outside the classroom by visiting planning practitioners at non-profit organizations, private consulting firms, and municipal planning departments. We worked to “take back the tar” by hosting the state’s only Park(ing) Day event of 2016, in which we partnered with APA-Illinois, local businesses, the American Society of Landscape Architects, the City of Urbana, and community members to occupy 10 public parking spaces with parks, a bike repair station, a coffee lounge, music, interactive art, and games. Finally, we have encouraged professional development through attendance at the APA National Conference, the APA-Illinois State Conference, and in our state capitol for Planners’ Legislative Action Day.
Description of Award Fulfilling Criteria

SPO takes pride in the scale and range of the events we have organized this past year. We worked to create new events and activities that would reach more students and foster leadership development beyond just our executive board members. We have followed the APA’s lead in connecting planners and supporting projects that help “make great communities happen.” SPO helps to build relationships among students and support educational and professional development, so that together we can contribute to our communities in a meaningful way. By creating platforms for active participation, such as volunteer opportunities on Park(ing) Day, public speaking and presentation opportunities through the weekly City Café, and political engagement opportunities through Planners’ Legislative Action Day, we have been successful in increasing member participation in our organization.

Each of the approximately 40 activities we hosted is unique and engages different segments of our student body and the community. Programming for this year included:

» City Cafe, a weekly event in which one student volunteers to teach their peers about their home city through the lens of an urban planner. (New)
» An expanded Park(ing) Day, 10 parking spaces, all but one “Command Central” space activated by event partners (Expanded)
» Professional development trip to Cincinnati planning firms and agencies (New)
» Tour of LEED-certified buildings (New)
» Dialogues regarding controversial current events between students and faculty (New)
» Increased participation in Planners’ Legislative Action Day in Springfield, IL: students visited the state capitol to meet with representatives and raise awareness on planning legislation (Expanded)
» Continued to manage a Bike Share Program for urban planning students and faculty
» Professional Development Trip to Chicago: We organized two trips (Spring and Fall) to different planning agencies.

The winning Planning Student Organization for the category of “Best Practice” should be a group that has successfully implemented innovative and worthwhile programs and activities, and we believe SPO has done this. The events are the successful products of the hard work and coordination behind-the-scenes by the Student Planning Organization.
Description of Planning Process, Implementation, and Level of Success

All that SPO has accomplished would not be possible without strong leadership, communication, and positive relationships with each other and with the faculty and students in our department. Our 9-person Executive Board truly works as a team, wherein each member contributes their own strengths and draws on others’ talents. The planning process for our programming begins with our bi-weekly Board meetings. The SPO President prepares a consent agenda that each board member completes prior to the meeting, which then dictates the agenda for the meeting. When one of us has an idea we would like to share with the board, we include it in the consent agenda and then discuss further at the meeting. When an idea garners support, we then form committees with those who are most interested in leading the planning efforts. These committees then take the lead in idea implementation and every event has been led by different executive board members. We define our level of success by the number of people in attendance and the feedback we receive from participants.

For example, the momentum for the Park(ing) Day idea came from one board member who was then supported by the rest. We formed a committee and divided responsibilities: one person worked on gathering students to host parking spaces, another worked on getting the Special Event permit and event insurance, and others worked with University Facilities and Services to secure the supplies we needed. One Board member worked with the APA-IL Chapter Executive Committee to garner financial support, while another coordinated with the City of Urbana and faculty members. We recruited student volunteers (outside of the board) to help on the day of the event, and--before it got rained out--we had a steady stream of community members and students participating in the largest Park(ing) Day in the Midwest region. The event was featured in the local newspaper as well as on Streetsblog and, most importantly, was well-received by the community, helping planning students build those essential Town and Gown relationships and expanding our reach into the cities we call home. Park(ing) Day allowed us to showcase the ideals we learn in our planning education and helped to make our campus more vibrant and welcoming.
2 December 2016

APA Planning Student Organizations (PSOs) Award/Best Practice

Dear Awards Jury:

I am honored to provide a letter of support for the nomination of our Student Planning Organization (SPO) for the Outstanding Planning Student Organization (PSO) Award in the Best Practice award category. Now in my eighth year as Advisor to SPO, I am especially impressed with the culture of participation that has been created by this year's group. Our students want to be in the group and they want to contribute. Their incredible sense of organization, including regular meetings, detailed consent agendas, and division of work loads, has resulted is programmatic diversity and success.

Last spring, then BAUP senior Anna Ma was elected as the representative for Region IV of APA’s Student Representative Council (SRC), which was an outcome of the culture of participation created by the SPO. About 20 students attended the APA – IL conference in Chicago this year, furthering interest in professional participation. In years past, the groups has participated in Park[ing] Day with one or two parking spaces, but this year, the group hosted ten spaces and coordinated space shares with groups in landscape architecture and architecture. As a mini-park, a bike repair booth, students throwing paint on a canvas, a concert venue and more sprung up along a busy campus thoroughfare, the number of spaces and the depth of activities organized by the SPO truly called attention to the issue, resulting in a feature article in the campus newspaper (http://dailyillini.com/features/2016/09/19/just-parking-space-students-reimagine-roles-urban-areas/ ).

The group’s professional development trips continued, with a visit to Chicago coordinated with an alumni reception for our program. The group also had a late fall visit to Cincinnati and Indianapolis, featuring visits to a public agency, private firm, and non-for-profit organizations, the visit model established for these trips. The group reached out to alumni in the area, to include them in evening activities.

One of the most impressive of the SPOs new programs is the City Café, a weekly evening presentation by various group members which celebrates the cultural diversity of our students. The programs are well-attended (averaging over 20 students per session) and engaging.

The SPO expands and enhances what we are able to offer as a department and we greatly value all they do.

Sincerely,

Alice E. Novak
Assistant Head
December 2, 2016

RE: Outstanding PSO Awards – University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Dear APA-SRC Outstanding PSO Awards Jury:

I am writing to wholeheartedly voice my support for the Student Planning Organization at the University of Illinois – Urbana-Champaign as a candidate for an Outstanding PSO Award in 2017. As a planner with the City of Urbana, I have interacted with the SPO on numerous occasions and every time I have been highly impressed with their organization, professionalism, and dedication to the planning field. They are an organization made up of extremely passionate and talented individuals, and they are well deserving of recognition.

I had the pleasure of working with the Student Planning Organization directly in planning their Park(ing) Day event this year, and they impressed me at every point throughout the process. I was amazed at their level of organization, coordination, and enthusiasm, and was happy to help them in any way I could. (To be honest, though, they did all the heavy lifting and made my job easy!) In the end they pulled off one of the largest and most successful Park(ing) Day events in the country, if not the world. In true planner fashion, the SPO reached out to many different groups on campus, and the participation in the event reflected their efforts to bring so many people together to reclaim a little paved public space for a day.

The Student Planning Organization is also highly dedicated to helping their members grow professionally. At the Illinois-APA State Chapter Conference, there were more UIUC planning students than I could count, but their efforts don’t stop there. They support and subsidize their members so they can attend a number of conferences and events, organize educational trips to other cities, and host networking events locally. It’s clear that they really care about their fellow students.

I hope you are as impressed with the Student Planning Organization at UIUC as I am and give them serious consideration for the Outstanding PSO Award. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Kevin Garcia, AICP
Planner II, Community Development Services
City of Urbana, Illinois
December 7, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing this letter to enthusiastically recommend the Student Planning Organization (SPO) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for the APA’s Outstanding Planning Student Organization (PSO) Award in Best Practice.

As the head of the Department of Urban and Regional Planning here at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), I am impressed every year with all of the events that SPO regularly organizes. From organizing professional development trips to planning agencies in nearby major cities such as Chicago and Cincinnati, to coordinating networking and cultural events, such as the weekly City Café, Park(ing) Day, and dialogues between students and faculty, they have done an amazing job of providing exceptional educational and practical field experiences for students.

As an example, their trip to Cincinnati this year—completely initiated and organized by the students—included meetings with local planners in the public, nonprofit, and private sectors, and they also organized a social event along with University of Cincinnati’s planning students. They toured an historic mansion, met with the Historic Preservation Association, and toured the Cincinnati Bell Connector Streetcar guided by the one of the project leaders. Earlier in the semester, they organized a day trip to Chicago to visit a range of professional planning settings, and they coordinated it with an evening alumni event that the Department hosted. These trips have allowed students to informally engage with a variety of planning professionals, observe a range of professional settings, and experience different geographic planning environments. Furthermore, they have provided students with opportunities to develop connections that have led to internships and career opportunities.

SPO also organizes a creative variety of social events throughout the year, every year. This year these events have included a ski/snowboarding trip to Wisconsin, and social events associated with the Open House for prospective students and with the new student orientation. One of my favorite SPO activities is the weekly City Café series, organized to empower the diverse student body to present about their hometowns. This year, they featured presentations from Taiwan, Beijing, New Delhi, Singapore, Tulsa, Belo Horizonte, and Moscow to name a few. These weekly events are educational, social, and they help to build a sense of community among the students. The SPO also works to increase inclusivity and student engagement through organizing dialogues with faculty to address student concerns regarding current events.

They are an amazing group. Each year they have been able to build upon the positive contributions and organizational structure of previous years, continually surpassing expectations. I am proud of what SPO has done on our campus, and I ask the APA to recognize their outstanding efforts.

Sincerely,

Robert B. Olshansky, FAICP
Professor, Department Head
Parking Day
A local bicycle shop volunteered all day to repair bikes for free at their temporary Bike Repair Station at the Parking Day in Urbana, IL on September 16, 2016. More information at The Daily Illini http://dailyillini.com/features/2016/09/19/just-parking-space-students-reimagine-roles-urban-areas/ Photo credit: Gurdeep Kaur
Planners’ Legislative Action Day
Mathew Dwight, Francesca Sallinger, Gurdeep Kaur and Devin Day - participants of APA IL Legislative Committee on April 20, 2016 in Springfield, IL. Photo credit: Francesca Sallinger
City Cafe
This year, SPO initiated a weekly presentation series to support the cultural exchange among planning students through presentations and discussions about their hometowns; here Nick Keeling is giving a presentation on the history and geography of Cincinnati, OH. October 25, 2016
Photo credit: Francesca Sallinger
SPO Board Meeting
Board meeting of SPO in front of Temple Buell Hall in Champaign, IL on September 14, 2016.
Photo credit: Ilya Chistyakov
SPO Professional Development Trip to Cincinnati, OH.

Urban planning students meet with the Historic Preservation Association to learn about the intersection of neighborhood sustainability, development, and historic preservation and tour a historic mansion. November 5th, 2016. Photo credit: Gurdeep Kaur
Event Pictures


Twenty students (not all pictured) from the Department of Urban and Regional Planning received financial support to participate in the conference; SPO made travel and lodging arrangements for students. September 28, 2016. Photo credit: Gurdeep Kaur
More than just a parking space: Students reimagine the roles of urban areas

Rachel Wilson, a second year masters student in Urban Planning, performs on Goodwin Avenue for Parking Day in Urbana, IL on September 16, 2016.

Emily Scott, Staff Writer
September 19, 2016

Friday morning was seemingly just like any other at the intersection of Goodwin Avenue and Nevada Street in Urbana. Cars drove by, buses let off passengers, and students used the sidewalks to head to class.

But 10 parking spots did not assume their normal functions. Instead, the spots were filled with a mini-park, a bike repair booth, students throwing paint on a canvas and more.

http://dailyillini.com/features/2016/09/19/just-parking-space-students-reimagine-roles-urban-areas/
Event Coverage

Friday, September 16, 2016

Highlights From Park(ing) Day Around the Globe
by Angie Schmitt

Champaign, Illinois

http://usa.streetsblog.org/2016/09/16/highlights-from-parking-day-around-the-globe/
Event Flyers

SPO CHICAGO TRIP
Thursday, October 6
Buy tickets at mkt.com/spoiuc

SPO Cincinnati Trip
November 3-5