

An Analysis of Wisconsin Planning Positions January – March 2023

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Center for Land Use Education
Anna Haines



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Introduction

A nation-wide study that I and a colleague authored collected over 150 entry-level positions from the American Planning Association job website from January through March 2022. Of those just under 100 were analyzed. Because the nationwide study of entry-level planning positions did not contain any Wisconsin positions, I decided to take a separate look at Wisconsin’s planning positions and expand the analysis to include all planning positions within a set period. The analysis is intended to inform undergraduate and graduate planning curriculum, planning employers, and students about the current needs that are reflected in planning job descriptions.

This analysis only examines job descriptions from January to March 2023. Every week I visited the Wisconsin American Planning Association (APA-WI) job board for all new job announcements. I visited each employer’s website and downloaded the job description. I used a qualitative software package called NVIVO to code each job description. I assumed that these positions are similar to ones one would see throughout the year.

Results

From January through March 2023, there were 25 planning positions posted on the APA-WI jobs website. I did not include internships or positions such as “village administrator” in the analysis. I selected jobs that either had planning in their title or related to a planning organization or department. Of the 25 positions, 88% (22) were public sector positions and 12% (3) were private. In terms of experience level, 16% (4) were entry-level, 76% (19) were mid-level, and 8% (2) were senior level positions (Table 1). Table 2 shows which organizations were hiring. I was surprised to see that Regional Planning Commissions had the most open planning positions followed by city or village and county. There were no state or town planning positions.

Table 1: Categories of Wisconsin Planning Positions

	Number of Public	Percent of Public	Number of Private	Percent of Private	Number in Category	Percent of Total
Entry (0-1 year)	3	12%	1	4%	4	16%
Mid (2-8 years)	17	68%	2	8%	19	76%
Senior (9+)	2	8%	0	0%	2	8%
Total	22	88%	3	12%	25	100%

Table 2: Hiring Organization

Hiring Organization	Number of Positions	Percent of Total
Regional Agency	9	36%
City or Village	7	28%
County	6	24%
Private	3	12%
State	0	0%
Town	0	0%
Total	25	100%

Job Description Analysis

I examined 25 planning job descriptions looking at qualifications, knowledge base, skills, and character traits. Qualifications included field of study and degree obtained (education), for example. Knowledge base included something like the following, “Knowledge of local government organization and its departmental operating requirements.” Skills could include specific tasks like “plan preparation.” Finally, character traits refer to qualities in a job candidate such as “works well on a team” or “takes the initiative.”

I specifically did not gather information on salaries as there are too few for any reasonable quantitative analysis given the range of experience, regional variation, and specific expertise. Some positions did not include any salary information and those that did often included a range. For example, one mid-range county position with a minimum of 2 years of experience posted a range of about \$52,000 - \$70,000 with a likely pay range from \$52,000 - \$58,000.

Each position description skill, task, etc. was highlighted and added to a category or “code” such as Analysis or Communication. I ended up with approximately 30 primary codes and over 130 secondary codes. The secondary codes were generated to break down a primary code for more refinement. Thus, both Analysis and Communication have several secondary codes each.

The Top Ten Categories/Codes

With many categories and sub-categories, this first section provides a few highlights. Table 3 shows the top ten categories identified in these 25 planning positions. All the positions indicated that a planning degree was a qualification. Communication skills are top of the list with 84% of the positions demanding these critical skills. Third on the list is analysis, which can include data collection and analysis, and various types of topical analysis (demographic, economic, etc.). Not surprisingly, plan and report preparation are in the top ten with almost 70% of the positions noting this skill. Permitting and codes is number seven on the top ten list with just under

Table 3: Top Ten Categories/Codes

	Number of Positions
Education: Planning degree	25
Communication	21
Analysis	19
Plan and report preparation	17
Use software programs (e.g., GIS, spreadsheet, database)	14
Build, coordinate, and maintain relationships	13
Permitting and codes	12
Manage documents and projects	12
Prepare maps and other GIS related tasks	11
Grants (prepare, manage, etc.)	11

half of the positions indicating that zoning was part of the job. I was surprised to see that grant skills were in the top ten as it was not in the top ten in the national study with only 15% citing grant skills as necessary to the position. This is an example from one Wisconsin position, “Preparing grants, proposals, reports, and

administering grant/contract requirements.” All but one of these top ten descriptors are taught in undergraduate or graduate programs to some degree. The one descriptor that is not taught in a formal way is: “Build, coordinate, and maintain relationships.”

Education Qualification

Every position’s minimum qualification had a BA or BS in planning with a list of a few other possible majors. One entry level position was specific to planning only: “A bachelor’s or master’s degree in urban planning, or a degree from a closely related field.” While a mid-level position was more wide-ranging: “Bachelor’s degree in urban/regional planning, geography, civil engineering, environmental science, economics, public administration.” Only one position had a minimum qualification of a Master’s degree though 13 positions (slightly more than half) preferred a Master’s degree. Many positions also preferred American Institute of Certified Planners certification.

Table 4: Education Field of Study

	Number of Positions
Planning	25
Civil Engineering	6
Geography	6
Public Administration	6
Natural Resources or Environmental Studies or Biology	5
Economics	4
Business	3
Urban Design	3
Architecture	2
Community Development	2
Landscape Architecture	2
Public Policy	2
Transportation	2
Journalism	1
Urban Studies	1
Computer Science	0
Construction Management	0
Historic Preservation	0
Sociology	0

Knowledge Base

Knowledge base refers to the knowledge that the hiring organization would like to see in candidates. One example is the following: “Knowledge of federal and state laws related to the principles, practices and procedures associated with land use planning.” Not all positions listed a knowledge base, but some listed more than one. The knowledge bases that show a “0” means that none of the Wisconsin positions listed it as knowledge the candidate needed.

Table 5: Knowledge base

	Number of Positions
Urban and Regional Planning	8
Local government functions and operations	6
Federal and state, NEPA and state level environmental regulations	5
Transportation	4
Zoning and other regulations	4
Land Use	4
Urban Design	4
Community engagement	2
Economic or community development	1
Economics	1
Environment	1
Historic preservation	1
Parks and Recreation	1
Public policy	1
Architecture	0
Fiscal analysis	0
Housing	0
Population	0
Real estate	0
Resilience	0
Site planning	0
Social concepts	0

Skills

Many positions are seeking candidates with a range of skills. Many of the skills were listed in Table 1. This table provides the full list of skills sought. One skill that was not included in this Wisconsin set of positions was professional development and was evident in the national sample. This skill is defined as the willingness to update skills and knowledge at conferences and workshops.

Table 6: Skills Sought

	Number of Positions
Communication	21
Analysis	19
Plan and report preparation	17
Use software programs	14
Builds, coordinates, and maintain relationships	13
Document and project management	12
Permitting and codes	12
Grants	11
Mapping, GIS - all aspects	11
Public hearings and meetings	9
Administer and oversee	7

Budgeting and financial management	7
Stakeholder engagement	7
Support Commissions and Committees	7
Supervising staff	6
Customer Service	5
Field Inspections	4
Design support and work	3
Annual work program	2
Equitable practices and multicultural	2
Bi or multilingual	1
Surveys and Engineering Plans	1
Tax incremental finance	1
Professional development	0

Analysis Skills

Nineteen positions sought candidates that could perform some sort of analysis. In 10 positions, data collection and analysis were important parts of the position. In 9 positions, the type of analysis skills sought after was more focused on various topics such as conducting a demographic analysis. An example from one of the position descriptions is: "...familiarity with common demographic and economic research and analysis techniques."

Table 7: Analysis skills

	Number of positions
Data collection and analysis (primary and secondary data)	10
Topical analysis (demographic, economic, housing, land use, transportation)	9
Quantitative (statistics, math (numerical, algebraic, geometric))	6
General Analysis	3
Other (zoning, sites, parcels, feasibility, modelling)	3

Communication Skills

Not surprisingly, communication is a critical skill in planning positions and was in the top ten categories with 21 positions noting communication in some respect was a critical skill. Twenty positions highly value the ability of candidates to write documents. One example is: "Excellent written and oral presentation skills and the ability to communicate effectively to a variety of audiences including elected officials, technical staff, and the general public." In this example, the importance of oral communication is emphasized and over half of the positions desire this skill. Other communication skills include the ability to create visuals or graphic displays. One position example for visualizations is: "Prepares maps, tables, charts, graphs, and other visual data as needed for reports." Finally, the ability to manage social media and websites is added in two Wisconsin positions, however, none of the positions mentioned social media. An example from a position in the national study said the following about social media and websites: "creating content for and monitoring the department's website and social media accounts."

Table 8: Communication skills

	Number of positions
Written documents	20
Verbal	13
Visualizations	5
General communication	3
Social media and websites	2

Permitting and Codes

Twelve position descriptions noted zoning and other codes and regulations would be part of the position. Of these 12 positions, many of them listed more than one of the sub-skills in Figure 7. Here are a couple of examples:

- Assists in providing information to various audiences: “Providing information and interpreting municipal zoning, subdivision, floodplain, and other development related ordinances to developers, realtors, designers, property owners, and the general public.”
- Code complaints and compliance: “Investigate and respond to code compliance complaints by inspecting sites, collecting evidence, notifying landowners of violation and meeting with landowners to seek compliance; makes recommendations for corrective actions and sets deadlines. Issues citations in accordance with department policies and procedures.”

The need for planners to understand permitting and codes is reflected in the national study as well.

Table 9: Permitting and Codes

	Number of positions
Review proposals, building and development plans, variance applications for compliance and consistency	6
Assists and Provides information to various audiences about zoning, etc.	6
Review applications and Issues Permits	6
Code complaints and enforcement	5
Develop and-or revise ordinances and other documents	5
Read and interpret plans laws, codes, etc.	4
Review site plans	4
Evaluate, research environment, transportation, NEPA-related rules, etc.	3
Assess options and-or impacts and make recommendations	3
Subdivision	3
Maintaining records, etc.	1
CUPs and variances	1
Process and review annexations and easements	1
Read legal descriptions and other records	0

Character Traits

Many positions provide a list of desired character traits. In Table 3, I highlighted Wisconsin’s top ten character traits. There are many and I included a number from the national study that were not mentioned in this set of Wisconsin planning positions. Those traits will show a “0” number of positions. Many organizations want people who can work as part of a team and work independently. They want people to be able to multitask, meet deadlines, and be detail oriented. Here’s one example from a position: “Ability to manage various types of planning projects with limited supervision and follow them through to successful completion on a specific timeline.”

Table 3: Character Traits Sought

	# of Positions
Work independently	13
Teamwork	9
Can lead	8
Multitask	7
Meet deadlines	5
Organized	5
Enthusiastic or energetic	4
Professional	3
Ability to problem solve	3
Detail oriented	2
Accurate	2
Collaborative	2
Creative	2
Decisive	2
Forward thinking	2
Interpersonal	2
Maintain confidentiality	2
Manage uncertainty	2
Prioritize demands	2
Problem solver	2
Tactful, respectful	2
Takes initiative	2
Work under pressure	2
Fresh perspective	1
Honest	1
Passion for public service	1
Resolve conflicts	1
Unbiased	1
Works efficiently	1
Can adapt	0
Cautious	0
Critical thinker	0
Curious	0

Entrepreneurial	0
Evaluate resources	0
Follow through	0
Positive	0
Proactive	0
Punctual	0
Receive direction from multiple people	0
Reliable	0
Responsive	0

Discussion and Conclusion

In this sample of Wisconsin planning job descriptions, public sector positions dominate who is hiring planners (88%). This result is similar to the American Planning Association's (APA) salary study from 2018 (<https://www.planning.org/salary/>). Experience level is similar from the national study that I and a colleague undertook where the percent of entry-level positions from the APA website was about 20% of the positions and in the Wisconsin sample it was 16% or 4 positions.

I was gratified and relieved to see that all employers in this sample continue to seek candidates that have a degree in planning. While other fields of study are acceptable, none of the other fields of study were listed in every job description. Thus, there is a role for our Wisconsin universities to provide a planning degree.

Here's what a model planner looks like based on this analysis:

The planner will have a minimum of a Bachelor's degree in planning or a related field, have knowledge of urban and regional planning concepts and practices, local government functions and operations, and know something about a range of federal and state regulations (environmental and otherwise).

The planner will have the ability to prepare plans and reports, manage projects and documents, and prepare and manage grants. On the regulatory side, the planner will need to review applications and issues permits, review proposals, building and development plans, and variance applications for compliance and consistency, and assist and provide information to various audiences about zoning, etc.

The planner should have excellent written and verbal communication skills, should be able to collect primary and secondary data and analyze it and undertake analyses on a variety of subjects or topics such as community demographics, economics, transportation, and land use. The planner is expected to use a variety of software programs including the ability to create maps. The planner should be able to build, coordinate and maintain relationships with relevant agencies and actors.

The planner should be able to work independently but also on a team and be able to lead a team. The planner should be organized, able to meet deadlines, and take on multiple tasks.

Wisconsin's local governments, regional planning commissions, consultants, and others have a need for planners who have the necessary knowledge and skills. Here are some questions that could use additional research:

- Are employers finding who they need?
- Are university programs teaching what our employers need?