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Attitudes Toward and Knowledge Gaps about Equity Among Practicing Planners Parts I & II

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Planning for Equity in Michigan:
Report to the Michigan Association of Planning Social Equity Committee and the Michigan State University REI Center

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Problem

The Social Equity Committee of the Michigan Association of Planners (MAP) sought to identify attitudes toward and knowledge gaps about equity in planning among practicing planners in Michigan. With funding from the Michigan State University Center for Regional Economic Innovation, the study builds upon previous MAP research while providing a basis for future projects. Our research set out to explore how Michigan planners define equity, to understand how important a priority equity planning is, to examine if planners and their officials have differing views on equity, to document what types of equity policies Michigan communities have adopted, to understand the major knowledge gaps around equity among practicing planners, and to identify what the major barriers are to implementing equitable planning policies.

Based on our readings, we defined equity as access to resources, opportunities, and planning processes for all, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those who have historically lacked such access. The survey data showed that equity and equality were at times used interchangeably, despite their marked differences (equality is treating everyone the same). Three important themes of equity emerged: *distributional*, *procedural*, and *recognitional* equity. Distributional equates to the distribution of resources and services contributing to access; procedural addresses how decisions are made and who is making them; and recognitional is the acknowledgement and respect of different groups' histories and needs.

The American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), American Planning Association (APA), and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) engage with equity in various ways through policy guides, codes-of-ethics, and accreditation criteria. Despite the resources professional and academic associations provide, planning with equity in mind has proven to be complex. The results gathered in our survey speak to these complexities and also highlight equitable planning interventions already taking place in communities across Michigan. We hope our contribution to the growing body of research on equity planning will bring clarity on defining and understanding equity and will inspire equitable decision making and outcomes.

Research Undertaken

To address the research goals, MAP leaders sent the 4,356 MAP membership an optional online, dynamic survey with up to 22 questions. We totaled 360 responses, with 189 respondents completing the full survey. This represents around 17% of the roughly 1,089 MAP members who are practicing planners. Respondents were asked to define equity, how they and their officials/clients felt about equity, what types of resources would be helpful to implement equitable planning, what types of equitable initiatives their communities were already doing, if they use APA equity resources, and the challenges they face executing equitable planning, in addition to professional demographic information.

Results

Respondent characteristics

Of the planners who took the survey, 70% identified as working in the public sector, 13% within the private sector, 13% as other, and 4% as non-profit. The most common "other" response was planning commission or board members. All Michigan regions had responses with the southeast being the most represented (Table 1). The respondents' ages leaned older. The majority were 51 years or older (22% were 51-60 and 32% 60+). Only 8% were under 30. This suggests a respondent sample with a large population that may be leaving the workforce within the next decade.

Figure 1: Michigan regions.[1]

Table 1: Region of Michigan in which respondents primarily work

Region	Count	Percentage
Southeast	82	43%
Southwest	23	12%
West Central	23	12%
East Central	20	11%
Northern Lower Peninsula	19	10%
Multiple regions/Statewide	14	7%
Upper Peninsula	8	4%

n=189

Table 2: Size of community in which respondent primarily works

Community Size	Count	Percentage
Under 5000	50	26%
5001-10,000	55	29%
10,001-40,000	74	39%
40,001-100,000	46	24%
Over 100,000	40	21%

n=190

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[1] Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy. (n.d.) "Michigan Public Policy Survey - Regions of Michigan". Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy. University of Michigan. https://closup.umich.edu/michigan-public-policy-survey/mpps-regions-michigan

Survey respondents worked in communities of a variety of sizes, as shown in Table 2. Michigan has over 1800 units of local government, many of which are townships with small populations. So it was unsurprising that 50% of respondents primarily work in communities of 10,000 or fewer people; yet larger cities were also well-represented.

Respondents were overwhelmingly White (Table 3). Additionally, five identified as Hispanic/Latino and another five identified as Arab-American. Our respondent pool was not very racially diverse, but likely reasonably representative of the actual Michigan planner population. We did not explicitly ask if a respondent had a Planning degree; however, nearly half (49%) replied that they had at least a Master's level education and 29% had a Bachelor's degree.

Table 3: Respondent race

Race	Count	%
White	152	81%
Black	12	6%
Other	7	4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5	3%
American Indian/Alaska Native	3	2%
Native Hawaiian	1	1%
Prefer not to answer	14	7%

n=187

Attitudes toward and knowledge about equity

Toward the beginning of the survey, we asked planners to tell us in their own words how they would define equity. While we are still analyzing the extensive qualitative data respondents shared, we have some preliminary observations. Please note the percentages reported in this paragraph may change slightly with additional analysis. When we characterized the responses, we found many more planners think of equity in distributional terms (around 40%) than in procedural (around 27%) or recognitional (26%) terms. One respondent said that equity means "[p]lanning that benefits everyone. For this to happen, vulnerable groups should be focused on," which we characterized as distributional. On the other hand, we would characterize a response like "[c]entering the most marginalized in planning efforts–those who have the fewest resources and those whose voices are often overlooked" as recognitional. A significant number of respondents (41%) described concepts that align with what we would define as equality, rather than equity. For instance, "[e]qual access to life-giving and life-affirming services and opportunities" fit into this category. Equality means treating everyone the same, regardless of their background or needs, whereas equity may mean treating some people differently in order for them to get the same kind of access or outcomes others get. For example, providing housing that is available to people regardless of income or race would be an equal approach, whereas an equitable approach

recognizes that specific groups of people face barriers when accessing housing and therefore it may be necessary to use additional tools to ensure disadvantaged community members can be housed affordably. We also looked for common themes in the definitions. Respondents most frequently talked about equity in terms of opportunity (21%), access (18%), and fairness (12%). Nine percent of respondents told us that they viewed equity, as we defined it, as harmful, unfair, and did not agree with it. Equity was defined by one survey respondent as a "non-merit, discriminatory and irrational based approach to decision making."

We wanted not only to understand what equity in planning meant to MAP members, but also to comprehend how the elected and appointed officials they work with felt about it (Table 4). Overall, the majority (54%) agreed or strongly agreed that their officials or leadership thought equity planning was an important goal. Another 24% were not sure or found officials' opinions varied too widely to categorize. This response indicates a fairly positive attitude towards planning equity and that in little over half of respondent communities, leadership is not a barrier and can be or is an asset to implementing equity. However, when asked about challenges, 40% of respondents stated lack of support from officials as a barrier. We tested to see if there were regional differences in officials' priorities, but those differences were not significant.

Table 4: How strongly do you think that the officials/leadership you work with agree that equity is an important planning goal?

Answer	Count	%
They strongly agree	35	15%
They agree	89	39%
They neither agree or disagree	34	15%
They disagree	8	4%
They strongly disagree	6	3%
Their opinions about equity vary too widely for me to categorize them	28	12%
I don't know how they feel about equity as a planning goal	26	12%

n=226

We also sought to see if public sector planners (n=146) were in agreement with their officials regarding prioritizing equity as a planning goal (Table 5). Nearly one-third of respondents rarely discussed equity with officials and 10% agreed with their officials it was not an important priority; however, 31% had discussed it and thought it was an important priority.

Table 5: Public sector planners: Do you feel that you and the officials you work with basically agree on how much to prioritize equity as a planning goal?

Answer	Count	%
For the most part, we do not discuss equity as a planning goal.	46	32%
Yes, we mainly agree it is an important priority.	45	31%
No, I think it is an important priority and the officials do not think it is as important.	21	14%
Yes, we mainly agree it is not an important priority.	15	10%
I work with many different communities/entities and it varies too much to say.	11	8%
Other (specify below)	8	5%

n=146 (public sector planners only)

We asked the smaller respondent pool (n=42) of private sector planners how often they discuss equity with their clients. Nearly a quarter (24%) said they frequently had discussions and 19% occasionally did. Thirty-one percent rarely, very rarely, or never discussed equity with their clients.

Equity policies adopted

We not only wanted to understand how relevant stakeholders thought of or discussed equity in planning with the respondents, we also wanted to hear from MAP planners what type of equity policies their communities were adopting (Table 6). Additionally, we inquired if they were aware of the existing APA Planning for Equity Policy Guide. Forty-two percent of respondents (n=189) were familiar with it and 31% had used it in their work. An additional 51% planned to use it. Eighteen percent did not plan to use it.

Respondents were asked to indicate different types of equity actions or policy changes that had been implemented within their community. They were able to select multiple answers. Investment in non-motorized transportation and making public participation more inclusive had the highest response rate (47% for both). One respondent said, "While we haven't done a lot of the items on the list, we have invested in non-motorized transportation [and] try to include the public in our master planning process." Another regional planner reported that their agency had "strongly advocated for, built special-interest groups around, and built funding for non-motorized infrastructure." Adopting accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinances and increasing affordable/workforce housing were also common choices. Investing in public transit rounded out the top five most commonly reported actions or policies. Twenty-six percent of respondents said their communities invested in transit, but not necessarily with the specific goal of advancing equity. One respondent said, "It's something of a loaded question. Our community has undertaken several improvements on the list, such as investing in non-motorized facilities and public transit. But we do so not in pursuit of 'equity' but in pursuit of advancing public health and safety." Another respondent reported that their community was, "Allow[ing] for transit stops as we work

on getting public transportation to our community. Working on a more robust non-motorized plan to continue facilitating walking and biking options. Promoting bike racks and also [EV] stations."

Table 6: What kinds of equity actions/policy changes has your community undertaken?

Policy/action	Count	%
Invested in non-motorized transportation	91	47%
Made public participation processes more inclusive	91	47%
Increased affordable/workforce housing	59	31%
Updated or added accessory dwelling unit (ADU) ordinance	59	31%
Invested in transit	49	26%
Adopted equitable environmental/climate change/hazard planning policy	36	19%
Implemented equitable hiring practices	33	17%
Increased affordable housing funding	30	16%
Adopted policy to increase accessibility for people with disabilities (beyond ADA requirements)	29	15%
Made other zoning changes	26	14%
Made land use changes to increase accessibility to goods and services for LI residents	22	11%
Documented historic contexts of underrepresented communities	22	11%
Adopted equitable economic development policy	21	11%
Adopted policies related to racial equity	20	10%
Adopted equitable energy policy	14	7%
Adopted digital equity policy	13	7%
Set up a resiliency hub	8	4%
Adopted equitable food systems policy	6	3%

n=192

Challenges and data needs

To better understand barriers of equity planning, we asked respondents to elaborate on what data might make it easier to recommend more equity based planning decisions (Table 7). A significant majority wanted data that showed the accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to jobs (61%) and, relatedly, a 10-year forecast on demand for affordable/workforce housing (58%). Affordable/workforce housing data was a frequent request. In addition to the previously mentioned housing data needs, accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to public or non-motorized transportation (48%) and accessibility of affordable/workforce housing to shopping (43%) were commonly selected. There is a clear desire for more data regarding the systems and markets that influence affordable/workforce housing.

Despite planners asking for data on accessible affordable/workforce housing, ADUs and affordable/workforce housing ranked high in equity action/policy change that planners have already taken. These results might suggest that planning interventions related to affordable and workforce housing are proving to be successful and planners want additional data to further work in this area, or that planners are making policy in these areas without being confident of their knowledge base and/or likely outcomes.

Table 7: Would having more data about any of the following issues in the community or communities in which you work make it easier to recommend more equitable planning decisions?

Data need	Count	%
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to jobs	119	61%
10-year forecast demand for affordable/workforce housing	114	58%
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to public or non-motorized transportation	94	48%
How representative participants in local planning processes are of the broader community	93	48%
More detailed community demographics	87	45%
How accessible affordable/workforce housing is to shopping	84	43%
Geographic distribution of community facilities	78	41%
Geographic distribution of community services	79	40%
Ways to diversify the planning workforce	53	27%

n=195

Additionally, we asked about the challenges respondents experienced when attempting to adopt or implement equitable policies and planning (Table 8). Unsurprisingly, lack of funding had the highest response rate (46%). Resources for equity policies and planning are often competing against other community needs. A planner wrote that, "All of these require [money]. I think our City/government [has] bigger issues than this." This was followed by lack of knowledge about equitable policies (42%), which suggests an opportunity for professional development and education by MAP to provide useful equitable policies for their different communities. One respondent stated that the "lack of a pure definition of equity" was a challenge. A large percentage indicated that they lacked community support or support from officials for equitable policies and planning. Private sector planners were significantly more likely to report challenges with lack of community support, lack of support from officials, and lack of funding for public participation, compared with planners in other sectors. There were no significant between-group differences for other reported challenges.

Table 8: What challenges have you experienced in adopting or implementing equitable policies or planning?

Challenge	Count	%
Lack of funding for implementation	86	46%
Lack of knowledge about equitable policies	79	42%
Lack of community support	72	38%
Lack of support from officials	68	36%
Lack of funding for public participation	54	29%
Other	39	21%
Lack of support from colleagues	29	15%
None of the above	28	15%

n=189

Discussion

The results of this study helped us to understand more about planning for equity in several ways in regards to our research questions. First, we found that planners largely view equity in distributional terms: who has access to resources and services and how those are distributed. We were not surprised by this, because planners deal daily with the arrangements and functions of land uses, public facilities, and transportation networks. The decisions planners make or recommend directly affect who gets what and where. We hope that planners also continue to explore how their work might affect the other forms of equity, which can ultimately affect access and a sense of belonging in the community. Our respondent pool likely overrepresents planners who care about equity, but we should also note that the planners who took the survey did not uniformly agree that equity is an important planning goal. For example, the concept of equity as we defined it in the survey seemed not to resonate with a group of planners that work in rural areas and perceive that those areas do not receive as many resources or attention. Some planners expressed frustration with the idea that they would be responsible for outcomes, arguing that all they can do is provide opportunities and the outcomes are out of their control. However, many respondents wrote passionately about how equity is a driving force in their work.

Second, Michigan municipalities are already adopting a wide range of equity-focused policies. These policies most commonly focus on two categories. Many communities have adopted ordinances that aim to increase the supply of affordable and workforce housing, such as ADU ordinances and zoning ordinances that allow greater density. These policies do not directly provide affordable housing, but they are also low or no-cost for communities. Many communities also report making significant investments and expansions in non-motorized transportation options and transit. We may be seeing an increase in such investments partly because there has been more federal money available in recent years. Despite these positive signs on the policy front, planners

want more data to help them to make better policy: almost half of respondents said a lack of knowledge about equitable policies was a barrier. Planners are especially interested in data about demand for and accessibility of affordable/workforce housing.

Third, we learned more about the relationships between planners and the elected and appointed officials they work with. Fifty-four percent of respondents think the officials they work with either agree or strongly agree that equity is an important planning priority, yet 32% of public sector planners and 31% of private sector planners discuss equity with their officials rarely or not at all. In some cases there may be missed opportunities for both private and public sector planners to educate officials and help change the policy trajectory. Our data indicates that private sector planners have some particular challenges in this area, however.

Lastly, we learned that planners may be doing things that advance equity without explicitly calling them that. In written comments, one planner even said as much, explaining that the main motivation for non-motorized transportation options was health and safety, rather than equity. It is hard to argue with investments in quality of life improvements like non-motorized transportation, and they do often help disadvantaged residents. But without doing any kind of analysis or thinking about who does and does not have access to resources, this may end up being an equality approach, not an equity approach.

Recommendations

Our first set of recommendations has to do with conversations about equity. We want to understand more about this, but it seems to us that more planners could be talking more about equity with their elected and appointed officials. Planners should make sure when we talk about equity we help people understand that it does not mean taking things away from one group of people to give to another group. Instead, it means increasing the size of the pie, increasing opportunities, or removing barriers, so that everyone in the community can do well there. We should not want people to struggle or to feel unwelcome. Everyone in the community benefits when everyone is thriving and feels a sense of ownership. We saw some indications in the comments that talking about equity makes some people fearful or angry and we do not think that has to be the case.

In addition, we encourage communities to adopt equitable policies wherever they can. Communities should be looking for the "low-hanging fruit" of equity policy. What policies can they adopt today that do not have big price tags but help increase opportunity and access for disadvantaged residents? We give some examples in the results section of this report. In addition, planners should look at existing policies with an equity lens. The first step is always to understand, through demographic and income data, who in the community may be underserved with public services, lack access to processes, or be struggling to make ends meet.

Finally, MAP, specifically, has an important role to play in advancing equitable policies, in addition to the excellent work they have already done. MAP could run focus groups or role-playing exercises that explore how to talk about equitable planning with officials and community members. MAP could also take a thoughtful look at what equity might look like in rural communities; our

survey data indicated that rural planners and officials may not see themselves reflected in typical discussions about equity. The MAP Social Equity Committee could conduct research that produces the kinds of data planners asked for in the survey, leading to further technical assistance for practicing planners. Pioneering equity planner Norm Krumholz of Cleveland, OH, argues that planners can define their own work, but have historically been too timid in doing so. Though there are real financial and political barriers to planning with equity in mind, finding the entry points to innovate, take risks, and advocate within communities can move the planning process to produce more equitable outcomes.

Student Reflection

This research project proved to be an insightful examination of equity in planning for MAP members. We were thrilled by the amount of thoughtful responses by Michigan planners. In fact, the qualitative responses provided to be worthy of more time and research and will be subject of a separate research paper.

The opportunity to both work with Professor Carolyn Loh and be guided through a research project from design to report was invaluable. We gained practical skills that will be useful in our academic and professional pursuits. We gained a better appreciation of the work and needs of working Michigan planners. Additionally, we gained insight into our own questions of pursuing a PhD and considering a career in academia and research.

Overall, the project has been a valuable experience in academic research. As planning students and professionals, we often think about problems and questions that impact our communities, but do not always have the opportunity to explore them beyond a classroom discussion. Our hope is that this research is not only useful for MAP and its members, but that it meaningfully builds upon the existing body of research of equity planning and Michigan planning.

Works Cited

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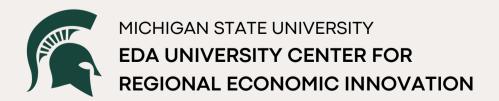
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