

UrbanPlan at the High School

Frequently Asked Questions for Teachers

Every teacher implementing UrbanPlan has asked the same questions you are probably asking yourself now:

- Can my students perform optimally on their standardized and/or AP tests if I incorporate UrbanPlan into my curriculum?
- Will the value of the student takeaway be commensurate with the 15 class hours the program requires?
- I teach three to five classes a day. I have no time to recruit or manage volunteers and no budget for any materials. Can a real teacher in a real school do this?

These teachers, including those in some of the country's most demanding high schools, have answered, **"Yes."** Additionally, over 99 percent of all teachers who introduce UrbanPlan in their curriculum continue teaching the program. Since its introduction in the Fall 2003 through Fall 2017, UrbanPlan has reached more than **43,000** students in **16** states.

The following information will help you make an informed decision about UrbanPlan's suitability for your classroom.

1. What Is UrbanPlan, and Who Created It?

UrbanPlan is a realistic, engaging, university-level, classroom-based, teacher-led, 15 class-hour curriculum unit for **economics** and selected government classes. It is a carefully crafted hybrid of project and problem-based learning. Through UrbanPlan, high school juniors and seniors discover how the forces of our market economy clash and collaborate with the nonmarket forces in our representative democracy to create the built environment in which they live.

Rigorously Tested Standards-Based Content

The curriculum aligns with state and national content standards for high school economics and provides a much-needed local government component to government classes.

Created by Academics, Classroom Teachers, and Land Use Professionals

The Fisher Center for Real Estate and Urban Economics at the University of California, Berkeley, developed UrbanPlan in collaboration with the Urban Land Institute (ULI), a national nonprofit organization of public and private sector land use professionals, and high school economics teachers.

Real Teachers, Real Schools

Every teacher who served on the UrbanPlan curriculum development team teaches in traditional classrooms in traditional public schools. As a result, the UrbanPlan program responds to these realities.

Here is what some of your peers, who currently teach UrbanPlan, have to say about the program:

"Project/problem based learning (PBL) curricula are often oversold by PBL advocates. PBLs often provide attractive headlines or TV news clips but must be extraordinarily well crafted pedagogically and logistically to accomplish valuable results—especially given the amount of time required. UrbanPlan stands out as the most professionally constructed and supported program that I've worked with in my 27 years of teaching."

—Wendy Holm, Economics Master, The Boston Latin School, Boston, Massachusetts

“Our seniors are required to take a government class and an economics class. They may ace the standardized tests on each subject ... but it’s UrbanPlan that makes the principles they’ve learned in these separate classes come together. They take away a visceral understanding of how market forces such as supply and demand, opportunity cost, and risk interface with nonmarket forces such as regulatory oversight, “public good,” and political pressure to affect the quality of their lives.

—Steve Teel, AP Government Teacher and Doug Powers, AP Economics Teacher, Berkeley High School, Berkeley, California

“If you want students to really get the roles of the public sector, the private sector and its entrepreneurs, and how the concepts of tradeoffs, risk, supply and demand, and opportunity cost impact their lives, do UrbanPlan. They get a gut-level insight into how these forces influence the decisions they make in their proposals—design, market demand, city revenues, investor return, and neighborhood wants and these decisions have profound, real-world consequences.”

—Jason Lee, Economics Teacher, Olympia High School, Orlando, Florida

“Developing student capacities for critical thinking and dispassionate analysis of complex issues makes them more effective, informed, and demagogue-proof participants in civil society—whether they are addressing UrbanPlan’s land use challenges or health care or immigration issues. UrbanPlan is the most powerful and engaging vehicle I have found to accomplish this objective.”

—Shannon Corcoran, Economics Teacher, Desert Vista High School, Phoenix, Arizona

“We sometimes confuse providing proper learning environments in which our students can achieve with not allowing them to experience frustration or ‘fail’ in any endeavor. Through the multiple development scenarios students must conceive and test in UrbanPlan, they discover that ‘failure’ is analogous to creating and testing hypotheses in science lab. It’s the rigorous intellectual process required to develop the ‘elegant’ solution to any complex problem.”

—Kevin Magavern, Economics Teacher, Plano Senior High School, Plano, Texas

2. Why UrbanPlan? The Educators’ Perspective

Strict curriculum standards, standardized tests, and burdensome resource pressures make it difficult for dedicated teachers to introduce innovative, engaging curriculum units in their classrooms that require students to

- Go beyond information gathering and analysis to **synthesis**; and
- Resolve problems that have “**no right answer.**”

The teachers on the UrbanPlan curriculum development team created UrbanPlan as an engaging and powerful vehicle for teaching core content issues and core learning skills.

They demanded a program that would

- Provide students with a sophisticated, integrated, and visceral understanding of **core content issues** in economics and government;
- Provide **individual accountability** and **individual assessment** lacking in most group projects;
- Reliably and consistently leverage the skills of outside professionals to advance the academic objectives of the program; and
- Create **no additional resource demands** for the teacher or school.

3. Why UrbanPlan? The Land Use Professionals' Perspective

The UrbanPlan Mission

UrbanPlan develops a more educated citizenry around the challenges and complexities of land use decisions so, together, we can create better communities.

The UrbanPlan Objectives

Students who complete UrbanPlan will understand three fundamental principles:

- The built environment does not happen by accident or by mandate.
- It is a result of the interplay of the dynamic market and nonmarket forces intrinsic to our market economy and representative democracy.
- Our actions as citizens and consumers can influence what is built, when it is built, and where it is built.

The United States will add 60 million people in the next 20 years. As our population grows, we ask our citizens to make increasingly complex land use policy decisions. Where and how will we, our children, and future generations live, work, shop, play, and travel from place to place?

Our answers to these questions will determine how we accommodate growth on our limited land resources without sacrificing the livability of our neighborhoods or violating our sense of community. Yet nothing in our education prepares us to become effective, informed participants in a process that is so critical to our quality of life and the vitality of our democracy.

If we are to effectively address, rather than hide from, the challenge of our growing population, if we are to improve our communities as they grow, we must elevate the sophistication of the discourse at the local level. This is why land use professionals across the country, through ULI, support UrbanPlan in their local schools, providing tomorrow's voters, neighbors, community leaders, public officials, and land use professionals with the insights and language to become engaged and informed problem solvers.

4. How Does the UrbanPlan Program Work in the Classroom?

Student development teams respond to a "Request for Proposal" for the redevelopment of a blighted site in the fictitious city of "Yorktown." Each team member assumes one of five roles in their private, for-profit firm: finance director, marketing director, city liaison, neighborhood liaison, or site planner. Their goal is to win the contract from the city.

Teams address challenging financial, market, social, political, and design issues; develop a financial pro forma and three-dimensional model of their plan; and present their proposal to a "City Council" of land use professionals that awards the development contract to the winning team.

Through these roles, students develop a visceral understanding of the various stakeholders in the development process and the challenge of reconciling their often competing agendas to create a well-designed, market-responsive, sustainable project. In the process, the teams must

- Read, analyze, and synthesize complex information;
- Resolve challenging financial, social, political, and aesthetic issues;
- Use a computer-based financial spreadsheet to test financial returns;
- Create a three-dimensional model of their site;
- Make tradeoffs to balance the often-conflicting public and private sector needs and wants of city government, neighborhood residents, the market, and investors; and

- Present their proposal to a “City Council” composed of land use professionals that awards the development contract to the winning team.

Over the course of the 15 class-hour project and before the presentations, land use professionals who have attended a daylong UrbanPlan volunteer training interact several times with the student teams.

“**Facilitators**” visit the classroom twice during the 15 class-hours. Through Socratic interaction, they challenge the students to think more critically about the UrbanPlan issues and the specific responsibilities of their “job” (financial analyst, marketing director, site planner, city liaison, neighborhood liaison).

“**Presenters**” visit at the teacher’s option. They have an interactive discussion with students on the professional’s own work and how it relates to issues and decisions the students are struggling with in UrbanPlan.

“**City Council Members**” serve as the final “accountability and reality check” for the development teams. The 4-5 person city council hears student presentations, challenges their proposals as in an actual city council hearing, and awards the development contract to the winning team. Council ensures that the proposals are responsive to the RFP, grounded in the facts of the UP case, and consistent with reality.

Through complex problem solving and interaction with public and private sector land use professionals, students learn that the issues addressed and the skills used in coming to an UrbanPlan solution represent a real-world situation.

5. Who Should Teach UrbanPlan?

Demanding Economics Teachers: UrbanPlan was developed by and for **economics** and **selected government teachers** who support academically rigorous, unbiased, problem- and project-based learning.

Teachers who have consistently set **high expectations for student performance** in homework and the classroom and who have held students accountable for their performance will have success with UrbanPlan.

Academic Core Content Classes: UrbanPlan was developed for and is **only supported in required economics** and some **government or civics** classes where students expect rigorous academics, receive meaningful homework assignments, and care about their grade. It is not supported in any other courses, including human geography and urban geography, environmental studies, business, architecture, drafting, or computer and technology courses.

UrbanPlan is **not well suited to elective classes** where students do not expect academic challenges or substantial homework or where their grade does not have substantive consequences to their graduation or college acceptance status, and where the class size is not as predictable as in required classes.

Class Size: Minimum recommended class size is 20—four teams per class. UrbanPlan has run in classes as large as 40 students but is not recommended for classes larger than 35. It is not suitable for classes with fewer than 18 students.

6. Is UrbanPlan Right for My Students?

UrbanPlan was piloted with a demographically diverse range of college-bound students: urban and suburban. A successful UrbanPlan program requires the following:

- **Consistently high attendance by every student**—a very low absentee rate is essential to run UrbanPlan. The team cannot function effectively when a member is missing.
- Students who can (and will) **read at 12th-grade level**.
- Students who have demonstrated the **maturity to accomplish work independently and in a group**.
- A controllable classroom.
- Students who have simple computer skills:
 - Ability to start up and shut down a computer;
 - Ability to input text in a document;
 - Ability to save a document to a remote storage drive; and
 - Ability to print a document.
- Pace: The 15 class-hour format is **intense. Students’ capacity to focus is critical**.

7. What About Objections to Group Projects?

The teachers who developed UrbanPlan demanded a curriculum and format that resolves key objections to project- and problem-based learning (PBL) programs—academic rigor, individual accountability and assessment, and “mule syndrome”—while maximizing the benefits of PBL formats:

- Academic rigor stems from standards-based content and high demand on core learning skills.
- Individual students assume a role and advocate a position with the team—given the demands of the program, one or two students cannot carry a team.
- Each member must contribute to the solution and can be evaluated, through rubrics and objective criteria, on his or her individual class and presentation performance.
- Each member must speak from her or his role during team presentation.
- Roles demonstrate to students the variety of skill sets required in developing solutions to complex, real-world issues.
- Because of the program’s format, described previously, and the “no right answer” problem, an individual student cannot have someone else do her work or find the “right answer” through any source, making it “cheat-proof.”
- Every team member interacts with practicing land use professionals.

8. What Are the Resource Demands on My School and Me?

The teachers who developed **UrbanPlan** stressed the strict curriculum standards and burdensome resource pressures that make it increasingly difficult for dedicated teachers to accommodate exciting new programs in their classrooms. Therefore, UrbanPlan provides full support for the teacher at *no cost* to the school.

The ULI support for the program includes:

- Teacher’s Guide and Lesson Plans;
- Teacher training—required two-day regional teacher training run in summer and winter;
- Standards-based curriculum and all associated materials;
- Land use professionals for the classroom who have attended a full-day UrbanPlan volunteer training; and
- Website.

Logistics

- Duration: 15 class-hours plus presentation (teachers may expand time allotted for program);
- Classroom: fully implementable in traditional classroom;
- Field trips: no required out-of-classroom trips; and
- Professionals: ULI sponsor vets, recruits, and schedules all **UrbanPlan**-trained facilitators, presenters, and city council members.

9. Does UrbanPlan Address Additional Core Skill and Learning Issues?

Yes, UrbanPlan addresses both core skills and career competency skills

Core Skill and Learning Issues

- Reading skills—high demand on reading to acquire, analyze, and synthesize information:
 - Focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information;
 - Make straightforward inferences;
 - Interpret and integrate ideas and information;
- Critical thinking;
- Problem solving and tolerance of ambiguity;
- Communication—oral presentations;
- Interpersonal skills and team building;
- Quantitative analysis;
- Technology skills—Excel financial model;
- Time management and organizational skills;
- Conflict resolution; and
- Opportunities for many types of learners to succeed with project.

School-to-Work Issues

- Introduction to the skills, processes, and behaviors required in a contemporary work environment; and
- Interaction with professionals from public and private sectors within the classroom and presentation to public and private sector professionals at culmination of project.

10. Why Doesn't UrbanPlan Use a Real-Life Project in My Community?

UrbanPlan addresses some of the most complex, highly emotional, and politically charged issues we address as citizens. UrbanPlan and its fictitious city and neighborhood allows students to step back and engage these issues dispassionately, while it ensures that curriculum content standards are consistently and appropriately addressed.

UrbanPlan does not advocate a position or point of view. The development team took great care to create an unbiased platform that provides students with insights into the interplay of the real market and nonmarket forces that influence development in our democracy. They will discover that every choice they make has social, political, economic, environmental, and aesthetic implications.

When students play with the full range of scenarios, they gain a visceral understanding of how the market and nonmarket forces impact land use decisions in their own community.

Grounded in the basic issues and with an understanding of the various stakeholders, the students can have an informed interaction with the land use professionals who visit your class to discuss the challenges of local projects. As UrbanPlan alums, your students will be well prepared to understand the costs and benefits of future development as they confront them in their city or town.

Time and Content

- The “case study” ensures that the full range of issues involved with land use challenges are tied to curriculum content standards in 15 class hours.
- Given the complexities and duration of real estate development projects, students could never meaningfully engage in a real problem in 15 or even 1,500 class hours.

11. Questions or Reservations?

Please reach out to us with any questions, challenges, or reservations. Our primary consideration is your students and helping you decide if UrbanPlan is a good fit in your classroom and for ULI to decide if the program is a good fit for you.

Contact Sophie Lambert, Senior Director of UrbanPlan, at sophie.lambert@uli.org or 202-489-1058.