

Research You Can Use

Over the years, planning has developed a fondness for quantitative research. Nothing gets an academic's heart pumping like a large database with many variables to play with. It's often easier to get quantitative research published, perhaps because it has an air of rigor that qualitative research cannot match. An unscientific sample of the research papers that have come to me for review over the past year has quantitative subjects outnumbering qualitative 18 to three.

Yet, as the two studies featured in this column show, qualitative research has some clear advantages. It can answer questions of why and how, not just how much. And in a field like planning, where pure experiments are impractical or impossible, qualitative research is often the best way to establish causality between variables, not just correlation.

Elizabeth Currid, an assistant professor of urban planning at the University of Southern California, writes about "How Art and Culture Happen in Urban Economies: Implications for the Economic Development of Culture" in the Autumn 2007 issue of the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. In the spirit of Richard Florida's wildly successful book, *The Creative Class*, Currid seeks to understand the drivers of the new artistic and cultural economy, an economy more dependent on brains than brawn. Her research question: "How do we create places where talented people who are footloose, capricious, and in high demand, want to live and work?"

Currid's sample is a unique mixture of artists, musicians, fashion designers, talent scouts, art critics, editors, curators, and gallery owners. Her sample selection was anything but random, as one contact snowballed into others. She asked her opened-ended, highly qualitative questions in semistructured interviews (many conducted at parties—what a great dissertation topic!). Her setting was New York City, limiting the generality of the study, and she used no statistics to test for significance.

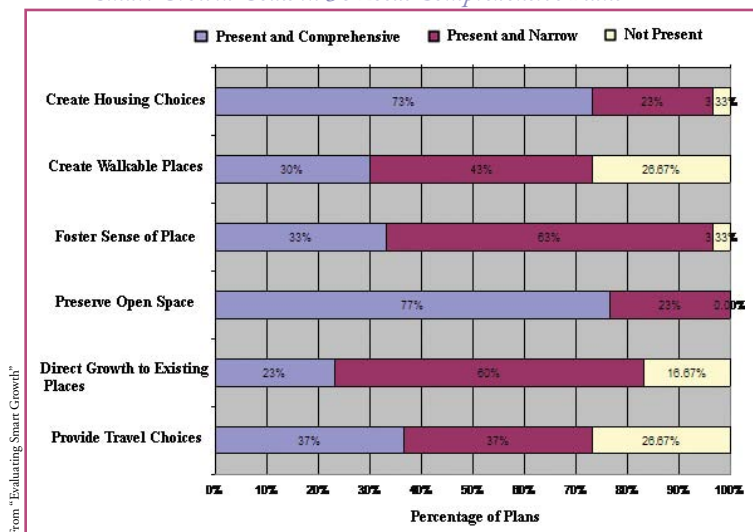
Still, when Currid talks about planning for the creative class, she speaks with the authority that hundreds of hours of face-to-face contact

When Qualitative Research Trumps Quantitative—Cultural Economy and Smart Growth



Gallery-goers in New York.

Smart Growth Goals in 30 Local Comprehensive Plans



can bestow. She concludes that direct subsidies for cultural activities are less effective than environmental changes and that, as planners, we can make a difference. She gives us an eye-opening glimpse into another world.

I can personally back up Currid's conclusions. My son, an aspiring actor in Los Angeles, is what Currid calls a "starving artist." His experience affirms many of her observations. He has managed to position himself in a dense, walkable, transit-served part of L.A., an area with good access to gatekeepers (managers, agents, and casting directors); cultural industries (television, film, commercials, modeling); and a network of other starving artists for social support.

The other article of interest appears in the September 2007 issue of the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*. Mary Edwards, AICP, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and Anna Haines, of the University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point, are the coauthors of "Evaluating Smart Growth: Implications for Small Communities."

Those who work at smart growth centers are often asked for a concise definition of smart growth. I don't know of one, but there are

defining qualities. This article singles out six of these qualities, makes them measurable in terms of specific goals and policies that one might find in a comprehensive plan, and then evaluates 30 local plans prepared under Wisconsin's 1999 comprehensive planning law to see how they measure up.

Edwards and Haines selected the 30 plans using specific screening criteria. They evaluated the plans independently, tested for inter-rater reliability, assigned ordinal ratings based on adherence to smart growth goals and policies, and added up the ratings to derive an overall smart growth score for each plan. They then statistically compared scores for towns, villages, and cities in their sample. This is about as much rigor and quantification as one could hope to find in a qualitative study.

Town plans scored significantly lower than village and city plans, which led to an unexpected conclusion: "Our commonly accepted smart growth policies," they write, "may be better suited for larger cities and metropolitan areas rather than the many small sized communities that were part of this study." The authors suggest an alternate set of smart growth goals and policies for small communities.

After reading this article, I had two questions for Jim Schneider, a lawyer at the University of Wisconsin—Extension's Local Government Center in Madison (and as it happens, a cousin). Schneider teaches local officials about the state's comprehensive planning law. I asked if, in his seasoned opinion, he saw a need for different smart growth goals in the small towns where he works. His answer was "yes and no." Different goals might help, but what's most important is that good plans result in good outcomes. He is a lawyer, after all.

Both of the studies described above are qualitative. Both are well done. Both provide useful insights. But one makes no bones about its approach, while the other tries hard to make a qualitative study sound quantitative. I won't say what my favorite is, but you might guess.

Reid Ewing

Ewing is a research professor at the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland, an associate editor of *JAPA*, and a consultant with Fehr & Peers Associates.