

# The American Institute of Architecture Students

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*Paper for Consideration in the Studio Culture Discussion*

*2003 NAAB Validation Conference*

*Submitted by the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force*

## Introduction

In November 2002, the AIAS released *The Redesign of Studio Culture: A Report of the AIAS Studio Culture Task Force*. Since that time, issues involving the culture of architectural design studios have emerged as important and necessary topics of discussion at schools of architecture, conferences, meetings and in the architectural press. Both positive and negative aspects of studio culture are present in all architecture schools. Thus, it is necessary to consider studio culture—and its effects—when accrediting programs. Currently, there are instances in the NAAB Conditions and Procedures directly relating to issues raised in the report. There are specific topics where additions to conditions or clarified processes might aid in more accurately observing and assessing the studio culture of each program. Opportunities exist to incorporate value statements about optimism, respect, sharing, engagement and innovation, all based in the findings documented in *The Redesign of Studio Culture*, into the C & P as measures of quality in architecture programs.

## Issues from the Studio Culture Report Addressed in the Current NAAB Conditions and Procedures

The Studio Culture Report identified the following 6 aspects of studio culture (from a total of 12) which are currently addressed in specific NAAB Conditions and Procedures:

### *Balanced Lives*

Condition 11, which mandates a 60/40 split in the professional degree coursework/outside coursework begins to bring to light issues of balancing architecture education with other interests of students. We support this requirement and believe careful attention should be paid by visiting teams in applying this ratio to both credit hours and faculty contact hours. Currently the difference between required professional degree curriculum (the “60”) and general education/elective credits (the “40”) is vague at best. Any course which fulfills a NAAB criteria or condition must be counted within the professional degree curriculum.

### *Community Engagement*

Condition 1.5 addresses architecture and its relationship to society. We support this condition and urge the NAAB consider how this can be emphasized and strengthened beyond the current level of implementation. We see an opportunity for growth in this area by encouraging schools to use the design studio as a means to design for—and outreach to—the community.

### *Design as an Integration of Many Parts*

This issue is associated with criterion 12.29. The comprehensive design requirement, a focus of NAAB visits during the last few years, begins to address this position, and must be carefully monitored to ensure all students receive strong and valid experiences.

### *Collaboration*

Condition 12.6 allows for collaboration to be evaluated, however we believe this should be strengthened through more explicit terminology. Teamwork and understanding of roles in project teams are essential skills in the workplace and need to be modeled, fostered and reinforced in education programs. At all levels of education collaboration should be evident in each architecture program. Graduates should have benefited from multiple experiences as both team members and leaders of projects, and this diversity of experiences must be evident to the visiting team in the work displayed during the visit.

### *Education of Educators*

Condition 1.3 allows for the continuing education of educators to be evaluated. We believe that it is each school's responsibility to require and ensure opportunities for educator continuing education to ensure that educators are supported in their efforts to remain current with issues critical to the profession. This is essential in order to provide the highest quality of education to students.

### *Diversity*

We support the NAAB Condition #4, dealing with Social Equity as an essential part of accreditation. We encourage a more critical evaluation of access to design studios by individuals from segments of our society underrepresented in our profession. This condition must promote progressive models for attracting more diverse bodies of students and faculty members. We also advocate programs for training and promoting more female and minority faculty to tenured positions and within the administration at schools.

## **Issues from the Studio Culture Report Needing Attention in the NAAB Conditions and Procedures**

The Studio Culture Report identified the following 5 aspects of studio culture (from a total of 12) which need specific attention in the NAAB Conditions and Procedures:

### *Time Management*

Often in architecture schools, long hours of work and short hours of sleep seem to be an accepted conclusion rather than a shocking fact uncovered by an accreditation team. It is our responsibility to ensure that students are receiving the best opportunities to learn how to manage time effectively. This should be required by the C&P and should begin the first day students arrive at school.

### *Design Process*

The nature of the accreditation visit agenda forces a product-based evaluation. This approach makes design process a very difficult piece of the design equation to evaluate. We urge the NAAB to focus particularly on how evaluation of design process might be included in the accreditation process and how repeatable design processes may be successfully taught. After all, the best processes may sometimes produce “low” pass work; while poorly conceived processes might produce some “high” pass work. The purpose of education is to teach the design process. As such, the accreditation process should spend the time necessary to appropriately investigate this, rather than solely focusing on the products produced by students.

### *Interdisciplinary Act of Design*

While there has been increased focus in the recent past to afford students opportunities for learning outside of the architecture school, there is still no real mandate for interdisciplinary learning. All students will benefit from some basic engagement of issues of business, writing, speaking, law, ethics, etc, all of which play a large and influential role in the architectural profession. The NAAB should take every opportunity to promote such experiences to broaden the education of students.

### *Assessment Techniques*

The accreditation process does not currently investigate nor critique the various assessment techniques used at schools across the country. Assessing and grading design work is a subjective process. This creates the need to evaluate how students’ work is assessed at each architectural program.

### *Studio Critiques*

An inquiry into different methods of studio critiques is necessary to arm accreditation teams with a series of models to share with faculty and students. The ability to share these positive models with students and faculty at schools would be a great improvement to the accreditation process. While there is certainly evidence that critiques have evolved from the arcane practices of the past, it is also clear that they can and should be an ever-evolving part of the design education.

## **Promoting the Five Cultures of the SCTF Report**

The Studio Culture Report identifies 5 aspects of the studio culture we believe vital to the evolution of the design studio as a more positive learning experience:

It has been proposed that an additional Condition (lucky #13) might be added to the C&P to ensure the studio culture is being addressed. While merely adding another condition will not ensure an adequate assessment, it will provide an opportunity to address the five aspects of culture: respect, optimism, sharing, engagement and innovation as outlined in the SCTF report. We propose a condition reading as follows:

13. Schools of architecture should constantly strive to promote architecture as a profession, not just a discipline, art form or occupation. As a profession it is our responsibility to first and

foremost serve all people and society through the exploration of architecture as a means to improve the health, safety and welfare of the individual, community and nation. Architectural educators, administrators and students should work together to establish and evolve the following cultures within their programs. It is anticipated that each school will find unique solutions to achieve these cultures.

1. *Optimism*

Schools should foster a sense of optimism in their students. Students should understand the challenges the profession faces while serving society. Consequently, they need to be engaged in discussions and projects while in school that will teach students how to design creative, thoughtful and professional solutions. Practice should be promoted as an opportunity to expand and evolve the profession, not as a difficult place to perform the art of designing. Graduates should leave school with a high level of energy and excitement with the knowledge and belief each is an important member of the current and future profession. The role of a professional program is to promote and foster success of its students, not to set a quota for failure.

2. *Respect*

Schools should foster and promote a sense of respect for everyone. Disparaging remarks about other disciplines, faculty, students and practitioners should not and cannot be tolerated. Every effort should be made to include all people from all backgrounds and lifestyles in the design studio to increase awareness of diversity and respect for everyone. This must go beyond the members of a particular design studio and include community members.

3. *Sharing*

The process of sharing knowledge, ideas and experiences is the essence of the academy. Forums should be promoted for such exchanges between students, faculty, practitioners and community members. Such sharing should happen between these groups as well as amongst peers within each group. A team approach in learning is vital to perpetuate a team approach in practice.

4. *Engagement*

Schools should actively work to ensure that each student obtains experience working with and engaging a specific community through the process of designing. Students should understand fully the implications of design on real people. This includes understanding the potential for the design process to strengthen communities.

5. *Innovation*

It is the role of the academy to promote innovation in design and practice. Schools should actively pursue creative and innovative developments in both areas equally. Particular focus should be placed on expanding professional services and methods of strengthening architects' active client base. Architects of today do not work alone or without constraints. Students need to be taught about collaborative design, budgets and codes, not as limitations on their creativity, but as opportunities for creative problem solving.

## **Additional Proposed Improvements to the Design Process**

In addition to evaluating how specifically the C&P and the SCTF Report are aligned there are additional recommendations we wish to offer:

### *Studio Life*

NAAB Team visits should include more time spent observing and participating in design studios. School preparation should also include better documentation of what actually happens day to day within design studios. Increased opportunities for teams to interact informally with students will aid in this assessment.

### *Student Health*

Schools should be required to monitor the health of students through university health systems. It should be possible to maintain confidentiality while having statistics documenting the frequency of architecture students' visits for medical attention, psychological counseling and academic counseling compare to the other disciplines on campus.

### *Student Evaluations*

More emphasis should be placed on the inclusion of faculty and course evaluation forms, as filled out anonymously by students, in the materials provided to visiting teams. Such information may uncover both positive and negative trends, as well as helping to develop questions and concerns for investigation by visiting teams.

### *Technology*

Technology continually revolutionizes the world around us. It is critical that architecture programs fully embrace technology as a tool in the evolution of design. Traditional values and methods are important; however ignoring the realities of the workplace is detrimental to students.

### *Statistics*

As a profession we have done a poor job of gathering statistics that will help us evaluate our position and plan strategically. To maintain a strong place in society and the marketplace it is essential that we understand who we are and what we are doing. In particular, tracking who students are, what they do outside of the classroom, and where they go after they graduate will help us understand the values of architectural education and the places we need to focus upon improving.

### *Ethical Obligations of the School*

The good of the student must always be the foremost goal of the academy. Protecting the health, safety and welfare of students alone is not enough. Schools must recognize their role in producing productive citizens as well as successful practitioners. Time, opportunities and encouragement to explore areas outside of the design studio is imperative. The best way to do this is to lead by example.

## **Conclusion**

At any moment we stand (or move through) exciting crossroads for academia and practice. In looking at the constant blur of the marketplace, of customer bases and of societal needs, one thing is clear: we, as a profession, have moved much slower to embrace change than the larger world around us. While perhaps we do not need to achieve warp speed, we do need to become more nimble, agile and ambitious in the results we expect! We cannot sit back and merely protect our ground. We must seek out ways to expand our horizons.

The partnership between students, faculty and practitioners is perhaps the greatest potential towards a brighter future. Students accept the role as the biggest stakeholders in the profession. We have the most to gain or lose in the long run. Faculty and practitioners have the immense base of knowledge to help us balance our passion and naivety with a sense of history and thought. Innovations are the result of previously unseen connections. There is no better place to start than with a new culture which nurtures the youth of the profession.