

AIAS Position on NCARB's *Pathways to Practice* Initiative

Washington, DC, August 14, 2026 – The American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS) supports NCARB's efforts to modernize the architectural licensure process through the *Pathways to Practice* initiative. As representatives of the voice of architecture students, AIAS believes the future of licensure should reflect the evolving ways architects learn, develop, and demonstrate professional competency while maintaining the rigorous standards necessary to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.

Students entering the profession today face a rapidly changing educational, technological, and professional landscape. Architecture must continually evaluate whether its licensure process accurately measures competency while remaining accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of future professionals.

The AIAS believes licensure should be rigorous, transparent, flexible, and centered on demonstrated competency rather than prescribed educational or career pathways. The profession has an obligation to remove unnecessary barriers while ensuring every licensed architect is prepared to assume the responsibilities of independent practice.

Improving Accessibility to Licensure

The path to becoming a licensed architect has become increasingly expensive and time-intensive. Rising tuition costs, examination fees, internship requirements, and the opportunity cost of pursuing licensure have continued to create significant financial barriers for many students and emerging professionals. Recent changes to federal graduate student loan programs, including new borrowing limits and the elimination of Graduate PLUS loans, have further increased these challenges by limiting many students' ability to finance the education required to earn licensure.

Unlike many other licensed professions, the financial return associated with becoming a licensed architect has not consistently kept pace with the investment required to achieve it. As professional educational costs continue to rise, students are often asked to assume substantial debt without a proportional increase in compensation upon licensure. This disconnect discourages talented individuals from pursuing the profession and limits opportunities for those from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

The AIAS believes the profession must address these realities. Reducing unnecessary barriers does not mean reducing professional expectations. Rather, it means creating a licensure system that recognizes competency more efficiently while maintaining standards necessary to protect the public in the built environment.

Just as other professions have modernized their approaches to professional assessment without compromising rigor, architecture should continue exploring pathways that improve accessibility while preserving public trust and professional aptitude.

Support for a Competency-Based Model

The AIAS supports NCARB's transition toward a competency-based model that recognizes multiple ways of demonstrating professional readiness.

The AIAS is particularly encouraged by a system that allows candidates to demonstrate individual competencies as they develop them rather than relying solely on a single sequence of examinations. Smaller, modular assessments have the potential to provide more meaningful feedback, reduce unnecessary repetition, and create a more transparent pathway toward licensure.

A competency-based approach shifts the focus from how knowledge is acquired, to whether a competency is possessed and how it can be demonstrated. Similar to other licensed professions, architecture should maintain a consistent standard for independent practice while allowing flexibility in how candidates achieve and demonstrate that standard. The AIAS believes a successful licensure system should recognize multiple pathways to competency while ensuring every licensed architect possesses the knowledge, judgment, and integrity necessary to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.

Recognizing Learning Throughout the Educational Journey

The current licensure model largely recognizes satisfaction of the professional education requirement as the completion of a degree program accredited by the NAAB. While degree completion represents an important milestone, students continuously develop knowledge and competency throughout their academic experiences. This progression of knowledge throughout a student's academic journey is not currently reflected in the licensure process.

Many students experience interruptions to their education due to financial hardship, family obligations, military service, health concerns, or other unpredictable life circumstances. Under the current system, these disruptions can unnecessarily delay progress toward licensure despite students having successfully completed significant coursework, studios, and other academic experiences that demonstrate consistent, meaningful competency.

The AIAS supports recognizing educational achievement through demonstrated competency rather than solely upon graduation. Awarding competency credit throughout a student's educational journey rather than solely at the completion of a NAAB-accredited degree creates greater flexibility without diminishing expectations for independent practice.

To mention a recent occurrence of this circumstance, architecture students that experienced disruptions to their education in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, currently have an unclear path to licensure. Those students who were forced to pause their education, many of whom never returned to complete their degree, have been introduced to countless barriers to their licensure process as a result of this disruption.

The Pathways to Practice initiative reflects a broader philosophy adopted across many professions: demonstrated competency should be recognized wherever it occurs while maintaining clear and equivalent standards for the knowledge and judgment required for licensure.

Maintaining Rigor and Protecting the Public

Accessibility should never be confused with reduced expectations.

The primary purpose of architectural licensure is to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public in the built environment. Every pathway to licensure must therefore produce professionals who possess equivalent knowledge, judgment, ethical responsibility, and decision-making ability regardless of how those competencies were obtained.

Like Professional Engineers, and other licensed professionals within the built environment, architects are entrusted with responsibilities that directly affect public safety. Public confidence depends not on whether individuals followed identical educational pathways, but on whether every licensed professional has demonstrated an equivalent standard of competency before practicing independently.

Alternative pathways should not become easier pathways. Rather, they should provide diverse methods of demonstrating the same professional standard.

The AIAS supports NCARB's continued work with psychometric experts, local licensing boards, educators, practitioners, and students, to ensure all competency assessments demonstrate substantial equivalency, validity, and fairness.

Licensure and Design Excellence

The AIAS believes it is essential to distinguish professional licensure from design excellence. While these concepts are closely related, they serve fundamentally different purposes.

Licensure establishes the baseline standard of competency necessary to protect the public. It confirms that an architect possesses the knowledge, judgment, ethics, and technical understanding required to practice independently.

Design excellence is a lifelong pursuit. It is cultivated through architectural education, mentorship, professional experience, research, collaboration, continuing education, and engagement with communities.

Architecture programs should continue challenging students to think critically, explore innovative ideas, and pursue design excellence, while the profession should foster an environment that encourages continual growth both before and long after licensure is achieved.

The AIAS believes a successful licensure system should evaluate the competencies necessary for safe and responsible professional practice without attempting to define or measure design excellence, or by mandating the means by which knowledge and experience can be acquired. Excellence cannot be reduced to a standardized assessment, nor should it be a prerequisite for entering and succeeding within the profession.

By distinguishing baseline competency from professional excellence, the profession can preserve the integrity of licensure while continuing to encourage innovation, leadership, creativity, and design quality throughout an architect's career.

Implementation and Student Engagement

Current students and recent graduates will be the first generation to experience the Pathways to Practice initiative. As such, the AIAS believes students must be included as active partners throughout its development and implementation.

The AIAS appreciates NCARB's commitment to engaging students through focus groups, pilot programs, and ongoing dialogue. Continued collaboration with educators, licensing boards, practitioners, collateral organizations, and emerging professionals will be essential to ensuring the success of this initiative.

Clear communication regarding competency requirements, implementation timelines, reciprocity, and transition options will allow candidates to make informed decisions while maintaining confidence in the licensure process.

Conclusion

The AIAS believes the future of architectural licensure should be defined not by a single educational pathway or examination format, but by demonstrated competency, professional responsibility, and a commitment to public protection within the built environment.

Licensure should remain the profession's rigorous baseline, demonstrating that an architect is prepared to responsibly protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public. Design excellence, innovation, leadership, and meaningful contributions to the built environment should continue to be cultivated throughout education and professional practice, extending far beyond the moment an architect earns a license.

As the voice of architecture students, the AIAS is committed to partnering with NCARB and the broader profession to ensure the future of licensure reflects both the evolving nature of architectural practice and the enduring responsibility architects hold to the communities they serve.

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About the AIAS

The American Institute of Architecture Students is a non-profit, student-run organization dedicated to programs, information, and resources on issues critical to architecture and the experience of education. For more information, visit www.aias.org or reach out to mailbox@aias.org.

About NCARB's Pathways to Practice

Through its Pathways to Practice initiative, [NCARB](http://www.ncarb.org) is working to ensure qualified applicants can enter the profession by creating a more accessible yet equally rigorous licensure process. NCARB's goal is to offer a modular, competency-based approach to licensure that fairly and accurately assesses an individual's ability to practice safely and independently. By offering more flexibility in how candidates demonstrate their competency, NCARB can ensure that individuals of all educational and career backgrounds have a pathway to architectural practice—while still maintaining the level of rigor needed to protect the public. To learn more visit www.ncarb.org.