

Background to the 2008 NAAB Accreditation Review Process and the Development of the 2009 Conditions for Accreditation

In late 2007, the NAAB's inter-collateral task group on Trends in Accreditation identified two primary trends emerging in other accrediting agencies:

- Performance-based accreditation.
- Evaluation of a program or school's performance against its own stated mission.

In interviews with leaders at the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors, the Landscape Architecture Accrediting Board, and the Higher Education Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, among others, the same themes emerged: accrediting agencies are focusing on evaluating student success or student performance and they are increasing the expectations for programs to conduct self-assessment against the program's stated mission and within its institutional context. Some organizations have more adeptly responded to these trends, while others struggle to balance the need to evaluate institutional support and specific curricular requirements with assessing student learning.

Since 1975, the *NAAB Conditions for Accreditation* have emphasized self-assessment and student performance as central elements of its model, and the model proposed for 2009 does so as well. In its discussions in February 2008 and later in July, the Board of Directors maintained their commitment to both of these as core tenets of the NAAB's accreditation model. In addition, the NAAB Directors reaffirmed their commitment to the essential procedures for accreditation, which are responsive to and reflective of the primary practices of accreditation.

Throughout its current effort, the NAAB acknowledges that architecture education and practice have become more complex and therefore it is appropriate "to revise its accrediting process in response to the advice of its various constituencies."¹

The NAAB's constituencies, through white papers and issue briefs, were relatively consistent in much of the advice they offered, especially with respect to the content of the Student Performance Criteria (SPC). For example, nearly all the papers submitted by the collateral organizations, as well as those prepared by the NAAB's own task groups included the following recommendations:

- Include a specific and comprehensive commitment to environmental sustainability in the SPC.
- Prepare graduates for global practice through cross-cultural and cross-curricular experiences in other disciplines.
- Prepare graduates who are able to practice ethically and professionally with an understanding of the centrality of the client to their work.
- Include a specific and measurable commitment to increasing the diversity of student and faculty populations in accredited programs relative to gender, race/ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, or physical ability.
- Strengthen the connection between planning and self-assessment by programs and demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement.

The 2008 Fusion Model – A Framework for the 2009 Conditions for Accreditation

As the NAAB Directors reviewed the outcomes of the inter-collateral task groups, the white papers and issue briefs prepared by the collateral organizations, the five models proposed in June 2008, as well as its own practices and procedures, several things became very clear.

First, no group proposed any radical shift in process, authority, or basic standards.

¹ 1998 Conditions and Procedures for Professional Degree Programs in Architecture. National Architectural Accrediting Board. p. 3

Second, four of the five models focused on the content and organization of Condition 13 – Student Performance Criteria (SPC).

Third, based on a review of all the recommendations and advice, the Board agreed that the 2004 Conditions for Accreditation (13 conditions, including SPC), generally speaking, contain all the critical requirements and expectations for a professional degree in architecture. However, within several of Conditions 1-12, expectations for student learning or achievement are embedded with expectations for institutional commitment or assessment.

Next, as a matter of practice, the Architecture Program Reports (APRs), and the visits have tended to treat all Conditions as equal, and deserving of a “Met/Not-Met” designation, when, in reality, certain parts of the 2004 Conditions cannot be assessed in this way. Likewise all SPC have been treated as equal when in practice some are “more equal than others.” Thus, the NAAB Board agreed it was not only appropriate to revise the content of SPC to be relevant in light of current practice and professional concerns, but also to group both Conditions and SPC in a way that reflect their relationships to one another and their relative importance overall.

Finally, the Board agreed that it was time to design and implement processes for internal and external assessment and review of the NAAB itself both in terms of the effectiveness of its procedures and its compliance with best practices as defined by independent organizations. This effort is lead by the NAAB’s Assessment and Evaluation Committee, which is chaired by the president-elect.

The 2008 model illustrated the results of the Board’s effort to address all of these matters:

- First, the NAAB distinguished those elements of the 2004 Conditions that support and affirm an institution’s long-term commitment to the development and continued viability of the program over time from those elements that define expectations for student learning.
- Next, the model attempted to delineate those conditions that are evaluated on the basis of evidence and artifacts (e.g. student work) as either met or not met from those that must be evaluated through a combination of documentary review, interviews on campus, and discussion with faculty, staff, and students.
- Third, the SPC were revised to be reflective and responsive to contemporary concerns in architectural practice (e.g., leadership, civic engagement, and environmental stewardship).
- Finally, the model included the addition of internal and external review and assessment of the NAAB.

The 2009 Conditions for Accreditation, while based initially on the 2008 Fusion Model, are ultimately a combination of all previous input from collateral organizations, individual comments and the findings of the 2008 Architectural Review Conference (ARC). Participants at the ARC were asked to consider all the options including maintaining the existing SPC, making revisions to the SPC, as well as a variety of recommendations for new criteria. Dialogue from the ARC, subsequent responses and refinement from the NAAB are what follows.

The expectation is that when reading the 2009 Conditions for Accreditation, the architectural community will find a great deal that is familiar with respect to resources and program characteristics. Nevertheless, much has been reorganized and refined compared to previous editions. For example:

- Expectations for long-range planning, self-assessment, and institutional culture have been grouped together in order to strengthen the expectation that professional architectural education occupies a unique and relevant position within the institution.
- Expectations for statistical reporting along with comparative data have been expanded.
- There are now 32 individual SPC, compared to 34. While many of the 2004 SPC have been retained in their entirety (e.g., Writing and Communications Skills), several have been revised or combined to address student achievement more broadly (e.g., Human Behavior) and in certain cases, the level of achievement has been raised from understanding to ability. Some are new and are based on the recommendations from the ARC (e.g., Community and Social Responsibility).

- The most obvious change has been to group the SPC into three realms. Each realm defines a set of relationships between individual areas of study and identifies the overall learning aspirations for the realm. Programs are still expected to demonstrate that all graduates are learning at the level of achievement defined for each of the SPC; compliance will be evaluated through the review of student work.
- Finally, programs that admit students with pre-professional or preparatory education are expected to document whether certain SPCs are expected to have been met prior to admission to the NAAB-accredited program. The SPC matrix accommodates this documentation.

In many regards, the basic purposes of the 1998 and 2004 Conditions for Accreditation have been sustained in the 2009 Conditions for Accreditation. Likewise, the five central attributes of voluntary accreditation remain. Finally, the core elements of the NAAB's process also persist:

- Programs are required to document their compliance with the conditions through a comprehensive, self-analytical report.
- A team will visit the program to confirm the results of the report and to document additional compliance through the review of student work, institutional policies, interviews, and other records.
- The final decision will be made by the NAAB Directors.

In today's environment of heightened expectations and continued scrutiny by Congress and others, the NAAB continues to be a leader in specialized accreditation. This leadership role can be expected to continue through the 2009 Conditions for Accreditation.