
Final Report + Recommendations for

The Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture

Prepared by Edwards Co.

Overview of Research Project

In light of concerns about drops in enrollment and negative press about career options for graduates, the ACSA board agreed in 2014 to make responding to these issues a priority and to develop a communications campaign for our member schools. ACSA hired [Edwards & Company](#), a research firm that works primarily with colleges and universities to improve their marketing and increase inquiries and applications.

The research project sought to understand how students, parents, and other influencers perceive the value of architecture education and architecture as a career. Our objective is to translate these research results for use in positioning architecture more effectively in the higher education marketplace.

ACSA invited member schools to participate by sharing their lists of prospective and current graduate and undergraduate students. Each of the participating schools got access to the research data. The American Institute of Architecture Students also contributed their membership list and participated in the process.

The firm engaged a cross-section of nearly 800 current and prospective students, as well as students that declined to enroll and recent graduates, through online surveys and interviews. In December a group of ACSA board members, volunteers, and staff received a presentation and report on the research, as well as recommendations for a series of “persuasive wedges.” For Edwards & Co., a persuasive wedge is a positioning concept that expresses ACSA member schools’ “unique, powerful, and authentic value,” described in a way that resonates with prospective students and stakeholders. After receiving feedback from the ACSA group on their research and concepts, Edwards & Co. completed their work by testing the persuasive wedges with groups of students and delivering a revised and developed set of persuasive wedges,

accompanying “supportive messages” expand on the core message, and recommendations for the outreach efforts that will form the basis for ACSA’s communications campaign.

How This Research Can Help ACSA Members

While ACSA recognizes the diversity of ACSA schools’ missions and institutional contexts, and that no single set of marketing concepts will fit each school equally, we hope that the insights from the research will assist you in understanding and improving your own efforts at recruiting prospective students and engaging your stakeholders about the value of architectural education. ACSA undertook this research to inform our own outreach efforts on behalf of the membership. We hope you, our members, will adopt or coordinate with many aspects of our campaign activities. Architecture schools of all types increasingly recruit on a national and international basis. A campaign to increase the visibility of architectural education, head off or correct negative perceptions, and drive a clearer understanding of the value of what ACSA member programs have to offer, will benefit our membership as a whole.

Five Bottom Line Research Insights

Edwards & Co. shared five major research insights:

1. Students see architecture as **creative, innovative, and influential**, but they primarily see themselves only as creative—for now.
2. Stakeholders are focused on design, yet **students talk about “making.”**
3. Faculty speak of collaborative problem-solving, but students aspire to make a contribution and to **change the world**.
4. Data show architects pursuing a wide variety of careers, yet **students initially plan to be an architect in a firm.**

5. Despite that, students want to know about all of the possible careers one can pursue, and the value of learning to think in a new, design-focused way.

These insights show some primary interests and motivators that should be at the heart of how architecture schools present themselves. The gaps in alignment between how ACSA members see themselves and how students perceive architecture school are opportunities for adjustment and for communication.

Recommendation: Validate students' primary interests and motivations. Establish an accessible and relatable voice. Narrow or close gaps in alignment.

Two charts were instructive in understanding how architecture students view themselves. The first shows how students and alumni **perceive architecture as a field**. The second shows how those same respondents **perceive themselves**.

BRAND PERCEPTION—ARCHITECTURE AS DESCRIBED BY STUDENTS AND ALUMNI		
Creative	Innovative	Influential
Competitive	Changing; Evolving	Rigorous
Problem-solving; Complex	Beauty	Unexpected (Solution)
Theoretical	Social	Cynical

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BRAND PERCEPTION—STUDENTS SELF-DESCRIBED (FROM QUAL. AND QUANT.)		
Creative	Idealistic	Analytical
Dedicated	Driven	Rigorous
Open	Defiant	Optimistic
Practical	Decisive	Organized

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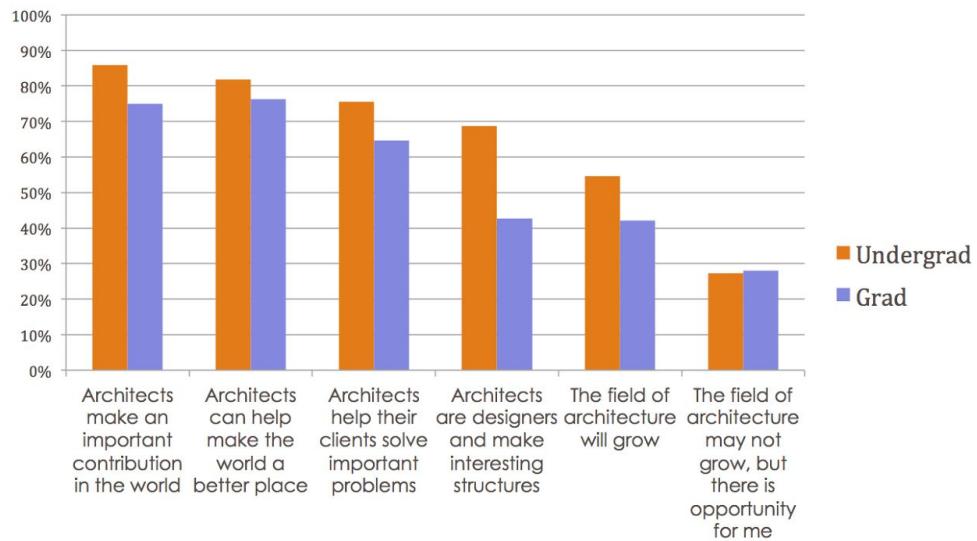
Enrolled Student Perceptions

The research engaged graduate and undergraduate students, most of them in their first year of architecture school. These students:

- Believe that **architects make an important contribution and help change the world** (then, solve important problems);
- Aspire to do creative and experimental work;
- Are interested in relationships—of structures to human interaction, of structures to the environment
- Think job outlook and earning potential are important but lesser considerations (yet the applicants want to understand their options);
- Choose their school based on **location, program fit, and cost.**

The following charts depict some differences in graduate and undergraduate perceptions, and single out first-year students' beliefs.

CORE BELIEFS



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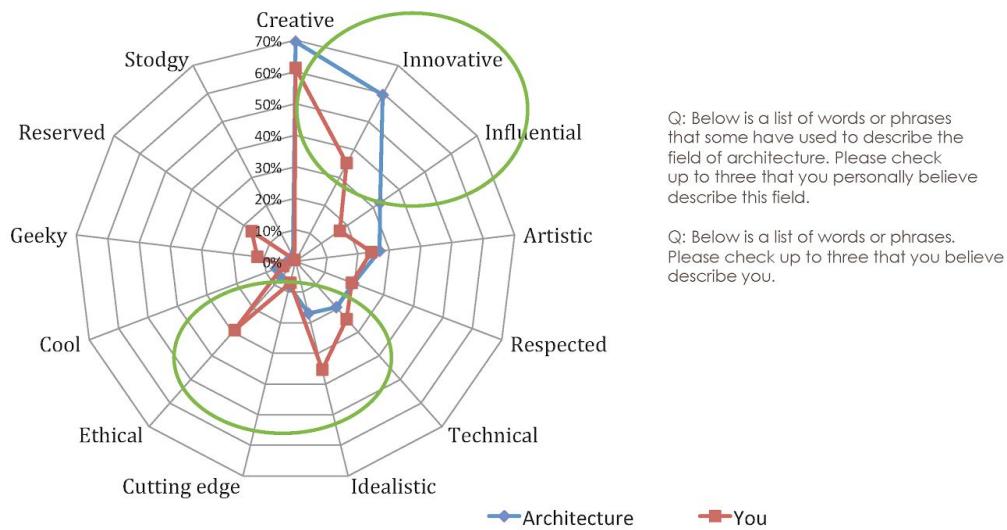
Q: The following are statements that some architects and architecture students have expressed they hold as core beliefs. Please check all that you personally believe.

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*Optimism and a desire to have an **impact** drive students.*

PERCEPTIONS: FIELD VS SELF

Students are choosing a field that is more creative, innovative and influential than they perceive themselves to be—but they see themselves as more idealistic and ethical.



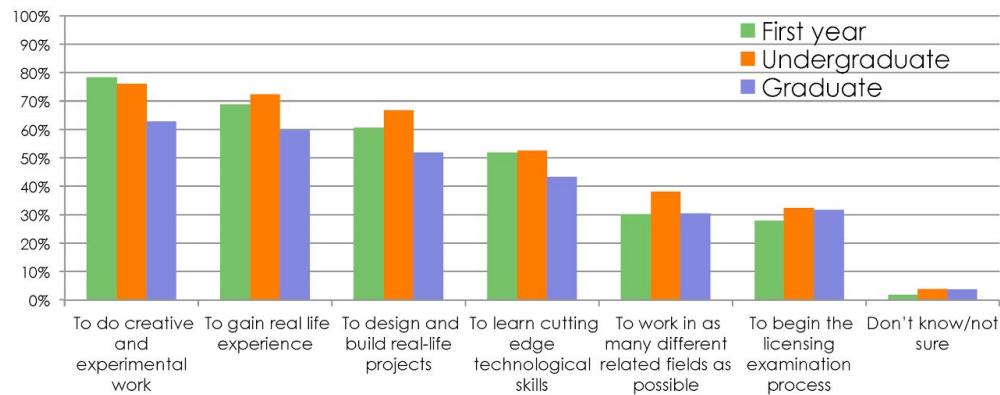
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Gaps in students' perceptions of the architecture field and themselves are potential bridges for schools in their messages. For example, one message may be that schools are places students can learn innovation and to become innovative. On the other hand, schools might not need to emphasize how they can transform students into being ethical or idealistic.

CURRENT GOALS

Passion for creativity is strong, but “real-life” is also a significant driver.



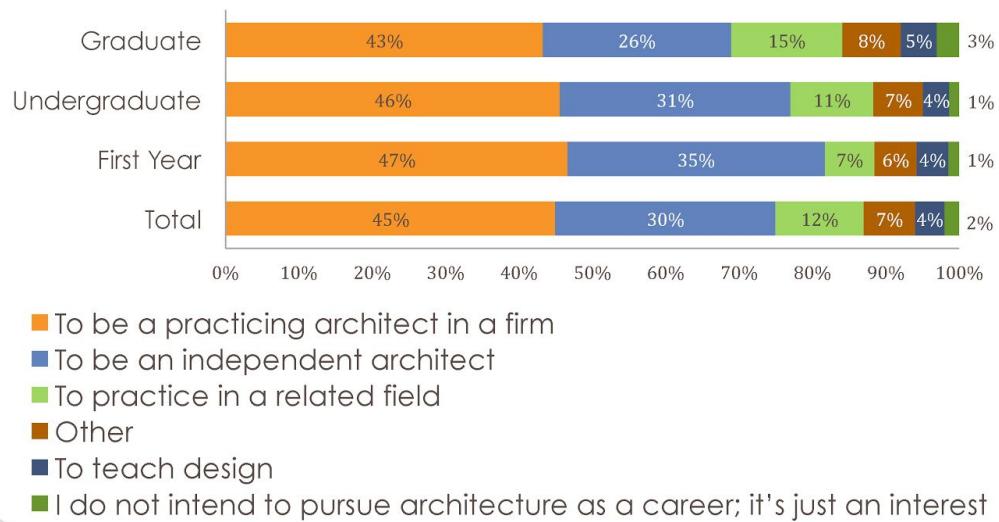
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Q: Having chosen to attend an architecture school, what are your goals at this time?

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CAREER GOALS

Most students anticipate a career as an architect in a firm. First-years may be slightly more interested than others in being independent architects.



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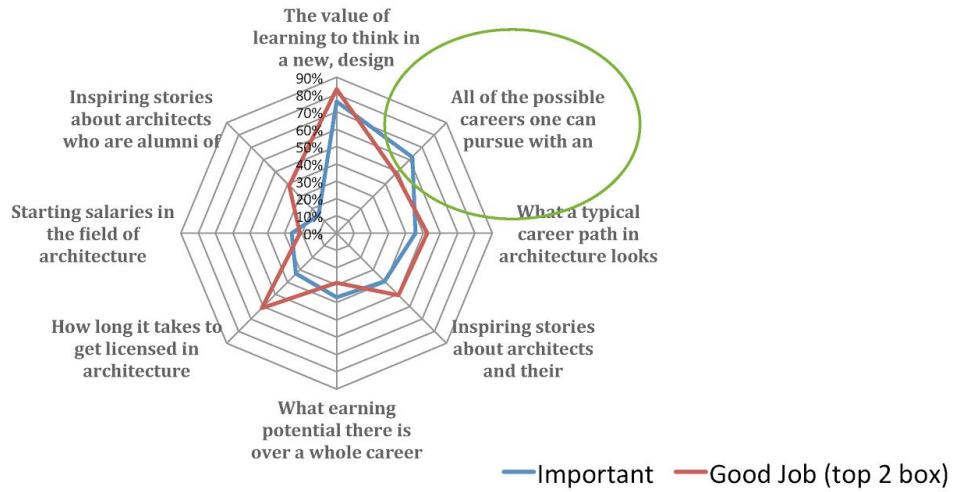
Q: And what is your ultimate goal?

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*There is strong identification with architecture as a **profession**, rather than as a **discipline**.*

WHAT'S IMPORTANT TO APPLICANTS

Schools can do a better job of helping students understand their options.



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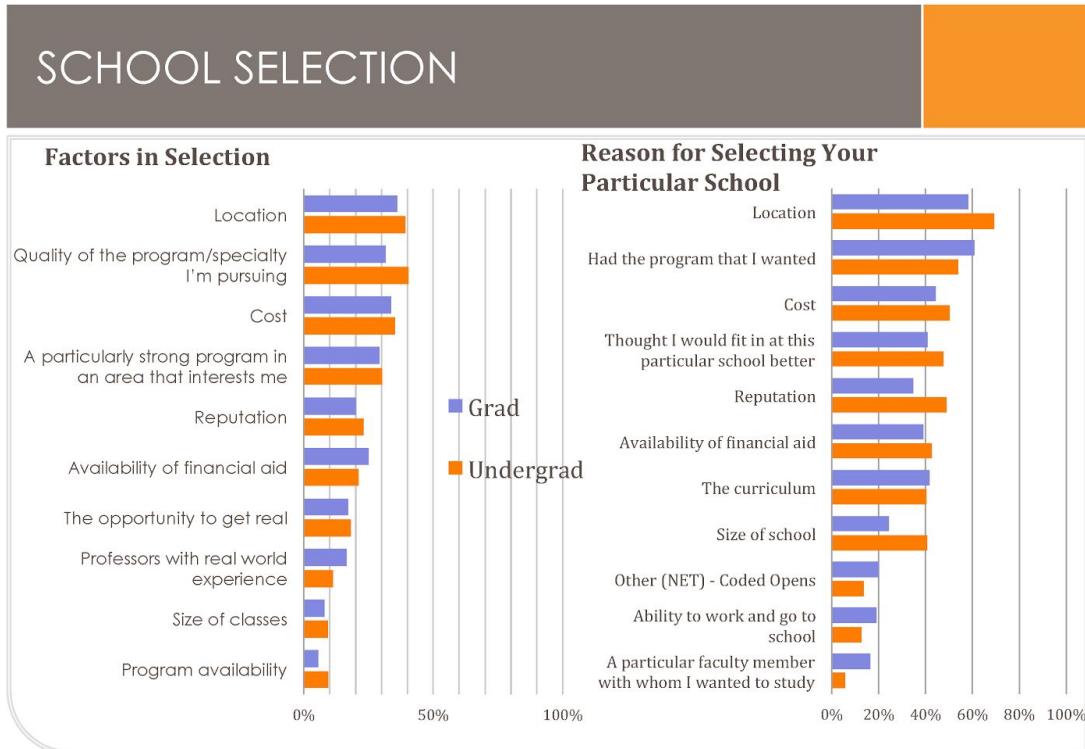
Q: When making your schooling decision, which of the following were important to you? Please check all that apply.

Q: On a scale of 1 to 5, how well would you say architecture schools do with providing each of the following pieces of information to you?

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This chart shows gaps between what students think is important (blue) and what they receive from schools (red).

Architecture students also confirmed several key points that architecture schools likely already understand about the recruitment and selection process. Some nuances between graduate and undergraduate students emerged, however.



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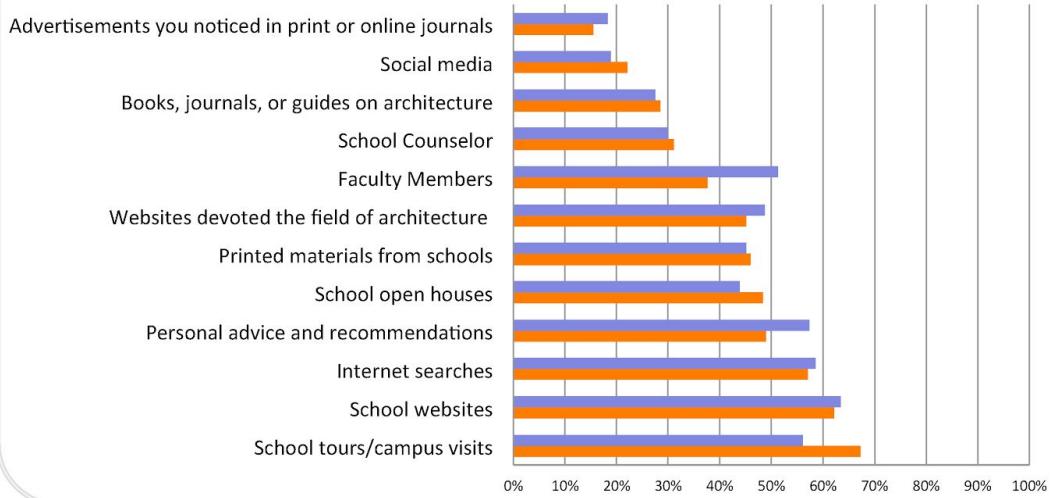
Q. Of the following factors, which one(s) would you describe as decisive in your school selection? Up to three.

Q: What made you choose [your school] over others? Please check all that apply.

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INFORMATION SOURCES

Undergraduates value campus visits more; graduate students value faculty and personal recommendations. Internet important to both.



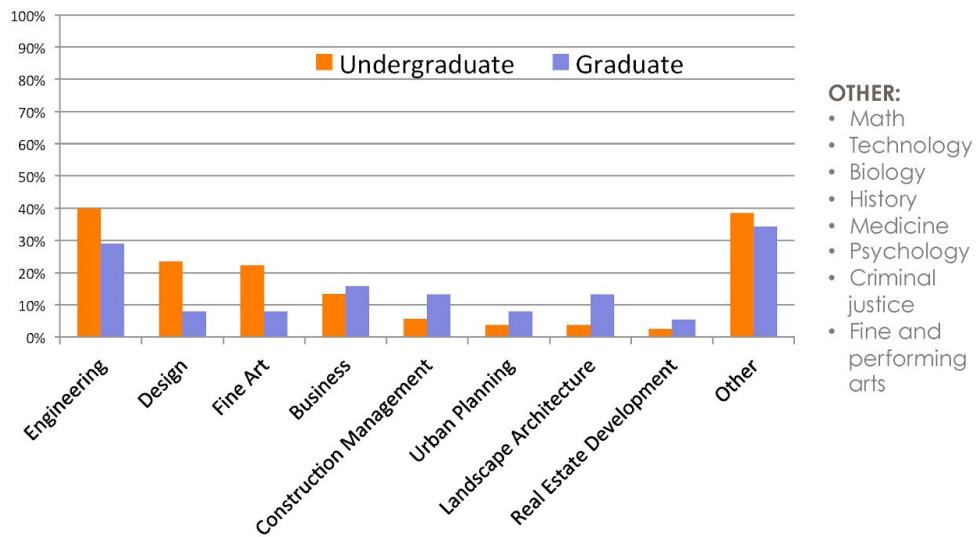
Q: The following is a list of places you could have obtained information about your choice of architecture schools. Please rate the helpfulness of each source on a scale of 1 (Not at all helpful) to 5 (Very helpful).

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ALTERNATIVES TO ARCHITECTURE

30% also applied to programs in other fields.



Q: Which other fields did you apply to? (Note: Students may select more than one option)

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First-Year Students Versus Other Students

The research identified several differences in perception or understanding between first-year and more experienced students. These differences can prove helpful in honing messages to prospective students, who typically do not have as developed an understanding about architecture and what happens in architecture school. For example, compared to more experienced students, first-year students more strongly:

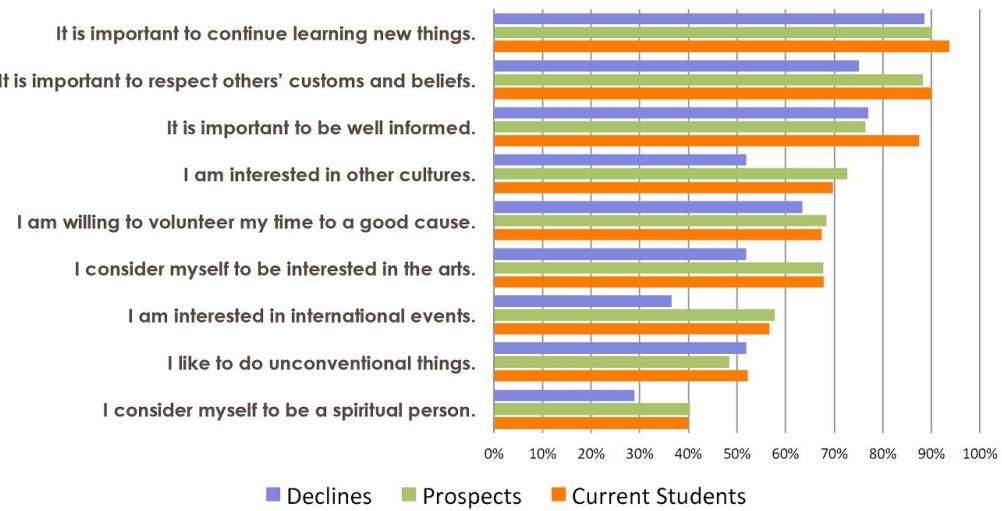
- identify architects with *designing structures*
- admire particular architects
- perceive the field to be more “technical,” while other students see it more as “diverse”

Divergence

The research results showed some notable differences between enrolled, prospective, and declining students.

PSYCHOGRAPHICS

Architecture student attitudes closely track to 18-34 year olds in other studies; however, decliners are less likely to agree except where they relate to learning.



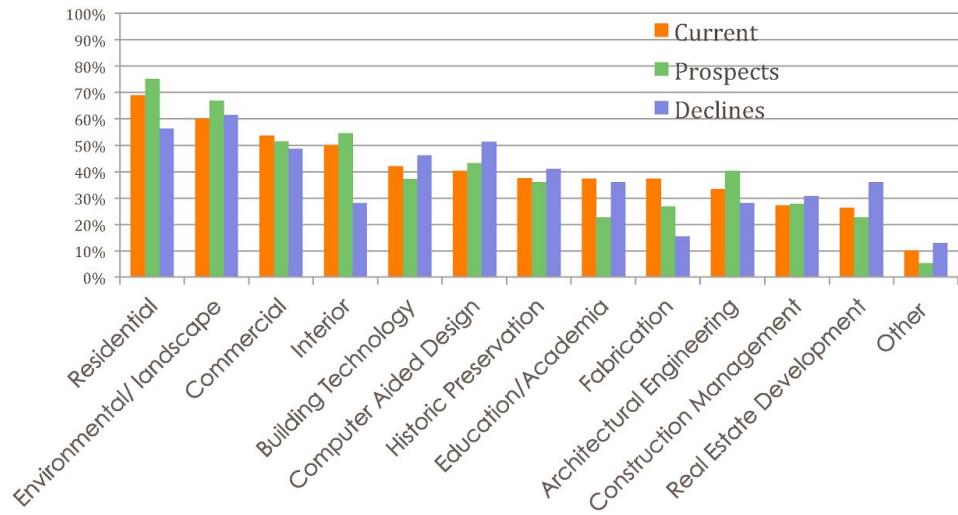
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Q: Below is a list of sentiments that people have expressed about some other issues. For each one, indicate your level of agreement using a 7-point scale, where "1" means "completely disagree," "4" means "neither agree nor disagree," and "7" means "completely agree."

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INTERESTS

Decliners gravitate to more technical fields.



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Q: Please check all of the architectural areas in which you have an interest.

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Recommendations for Positioning, Branding, and Outreach

Edwards & Co. provided a number of recommendations for positioning architecture education using messages that:

- are authentic and timeless;
- resonate emotionally with the audience;
- align with what the market wants to “buy” (and with what influencers want to support); and
- increase active awareness and consideration.

They emphasized what motivates and inspires students:

- Aspiring architects tend to discover their interest at a relatively young age—or they later connect a related interest to architecture.
- They have a strong stated desire to make a difference and to contribute to a better built environment.
- Financial reward is not their primary driver; nevertheless, they are interested to know what options will be open to them.
- Some students are reluctant to study architecture as undergraduates, because they are concerned about closing off options and the level of commitment required.