

“Learning to Lie”: Falsification in Architectural Internship

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Introduction

Historically, most interns were trained by mentors. A daily, working relationship allowed the experienced practitioner to transfer knowledge and skills to the apprentice. However, such a sustained learning environment became less attainable as architectural practice grew more complex. With the decline of mentorship, interns lacked a structured transition between formal education and architectural registration. A deficiency emerged in the preparation of competent architects. (Internship Development Program Guidelines, 1998-99:7)

The everyday life of most entry-level architects, particularly first jobs, resembles that of a laborer more than that of a professional. There are regular hours with little flexibility, repetitive tasks, piecemeal undertakings that give little sense of accomplishment or overview, and scant control over one's own activities. (Cuff 1992:133)

The first quote is NCARB's introduction to the Intern Development Program (IDP), placed at the beginning of *IDP Guidelines*, the publication that explains the program's requirement to interns. It is the program's "first words" to interns. The second is from Dana Cuff's groundbreaking sociological analysis of the profession of architecture. These visions are similar yet strikingly different. We explore the space between these visions—one policy-oriented and one sociological—through an examination of the issue of document falsification in IDP. Through this we hope to begin to unravel the reality of architectural internship, "the most essential link connecting students to the world of practice," according to the well-known Carnegie Foundation publication, *Building Community*. It is, however, also the "most troubled phase of the continuing education of architects" (Boyer and Mitgang 1996:115).

The current work is an unexpected outgrowth of our nationwide assessment of IDP, the Architectural Internship Evaluation Project (AIEP). When the five collaterals were gearing up for an "Internship Summit" in April of 1999, NCARB—the architectural organization with primary control over IDP—was in need of some empirical data on IDP since the performance of

this program had not been formally evaluated since its inception. The present authors constructed and administered a set of surveys to national random samples of current interns, former interns, registered architects, state board administrators, and local and state AIA component staff. In total, the project compiled responses from almost 1,400 individuals.¹ While time consuming to analyze, ample opportunities for those surveyed to write in qualitative comments were provided. Collecting qualitative data (in addition to quantitative survey data) was crucial given that so little research has been conducted on architectural internship to date.

Falsification of IDP Documents

When given the opportunity in a set of open-ended questions to identify the key issues surrounding IDP, a substantial minority of interns and practitioners mentioned the issue of falsification. One first glance, a few interns lying about their work experience might not seem to be a terribly pressing issue in the larger scheme of things. Interns are not power brokers in the field; they are more accurately described as its workhorses; internship as an "institution" is plagued with problems from low pay and questionable labor practices to poor and even abusive mentorship. And the profession also has been frustratingly stubborn in diversifying its membership—it remains "a White Gentleman's Profession" (*Progressive Architecture*, 1994)—and the informal processes of internship may have something to do with it.

So why focus on this form of deviance, something that may appear to be a minor or even distracting issue? As criminologists have found, seemingly trivial instances of deviance are often fruitful places of insight. The everyday world—so close and familiar—can be strangely opaque to social analysis. The more familiar and mundane, the more veiled the myriad controlling social processes may be. By focusing on sites where social control fails, the taken-for-granted nature of the world may be un-

covered. Deviance is but the flip side of normative social processes. To see how it fails, we see how it works.

Casting blame at the feet of interns is not our intent. While psychological factors may play a role in deviance, the bulk of criminological theory argues for the more powerful effects of situational and institutional factors. The purpose of this paper is to begin to analyze these factors.

The History and Structure of IDP²

To understand the significance of the falsification of IDP documents, the history, goals, and procedures of the program need examination. The IDP was developed in the mid-1970s in a push to move beyond the grim figure of the novice laboring for years designing toilet room details. And today, most architects seem to agree that a certain period of practical experience is valuable before a candidate sits for the registration examination.

In the early 1970s, NCARB and AIA created a "guide force" to explore the possibility of structuring internship to ensure a minimum level of diversity of experience. The initial structure of the program—which has changed relatively little over the years—was constructed subjectively and informally by a subset of the guide force's members.³ Using their experience as practitioners, they outlined twenty-eight areas that comprehensively comprised "practice." In 1976-77, this program was pilot tested in three states for a period of eighteen months. This test revealed the program to be "over designed" and the twenty-eight categories were collapsed into fourteen (later expanded to sixteen).

Historically, the major challenge for proponents of IDP has been encouraging the states to require it for their interns. NCARB is charged with promulgating IDP rules and procedures and for its record-keeping, but it has little to no legal power to regulate the practice of architecture. It is instead a federation of architectural registration boards who in turn have the authority to regulate the practice of architecture within their jurisdictions. To date, 92% of NCARB state boards require or will require the completion of IDP before a candidate may sit for the ARE.

What does it mean to "be in" IDP today? Periodically, interns complete an NCARB Training Unit Report, recording the number of "training units" completed. Interns present the completed form to their employer who is then responsible for checking it for accuracy, signing and dating it, and submitting it to NCARB. The Council staff records the hours and sends a confirmation to the intern. Once interns have fulfilled IDP minimum requirements they may have NCARB transfer their file to their state board certifying that they are qualified to sit for the Architect Registration Examination.

This is the neat picture of IDP; our study, however, reveals a more complicated one. Consider, for example, that more than half of current interns surveyed and about 40% of former interns report finding it difficult to get experience in at least three of the required training areas. One intern from Illinois explained the conundrum well:

Interns are pawns in the industry, and at times, it feels as challenging to me as getting to the opposite end of a chessboard as to complete the IDP requirements. I do not have control over what I will be assigned to next.

Current and former interns, as well as practitioners noted how some employers see interns as cheap labor and have little interest or ability to mentor. "There is a lack of mentoring," was an all too frequent comment. As one former intern noted, "Most employers don't care about IDP or registration; [they] only care about production!" This is not an unexpected result. *Building Community* (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996:116) noted that architecture is not well placed economically to sustain a formalized internship:

The architecture profession . . . must support a required system of internship prior to licensure in an industry that has neither the financial resources of law or medicine, the stability and public support of teaching, nor a network of locations like hospitals or schools where education and practice can be seamlessly connected.

Faced with an employer who is uninterested or hostile to the notion of "internship," or simply economically unable to sustain it, interns may find themselves in limbo—unable to attain registration without adequate experience but unable to obtain experience because of employment restrictions. As one practitioner noted, "Internship (IDP requirements) could take years to complete in uncooperative firms."

Embedded in the structure of IDP is also the assumption that employers are willing, motivated, and capable of monitoring the accuracy of the Training Unit Reports. While many interns were satisfied with the expertise and ethics of their employers, some reported disturbing stories. For example, one intern commented that of all things, he really "was not ready for the stunning lack of professionalism on the part of [his] many employers," and several practitioners noted how many employers simply see interns as "slave labor."

Even more extreme behavior was reported. The common thread was the practice of employers using the promise of needed signatures for IDP reports to coerce interns. An extreme example was relayed by this current intern:

At one firm I was treated so poorly that I wished to give two weeks notice. I was informed [that] my IDP forms would not be filled out if I left before the end of the project (a good two years away). [...] My only choices were to continue to work at the firm (hoping to catch my boss on a "good" day), leave with nothing to show for the hell I went through, or fill out the forms myself (and hope NCARB wouldn't figure it out).

Another intern reinforced this problem when he noted that the most negative aspect of his internship was: "the registered


Employer's Participation Level of Intent of Intern	No Knowledge	Negligence, or "sholud have known"	Full knowledge
			
No conscious intention		Mistake or ignorance Poor record keeping Pre-reporting	Pre-reporting
	Forging signatures for administrative convenience	Fuzzy boundary definitions Exaggerating hours	Exaggerating hours
Full intent to defraud	Forging signature to hide falsification		Partial or complete falsification of records

Table 1 - The Continuum of Falsification: Level of Intent and the Parties Involved

architect [who] used his signature for IDP to control interns."

One intern is particularly insightful when he observes that "IDP does not force/encourage/require [the] employer to train an intern in any manner. IDP only requires that they present documentation that such training is taking place." Indeed, one of the most frequent critiques of IDP was that it is "just paper-work." Given this constellation of factors, it is not surprising when this intern tells us that "most [architects] perceive IDP as silly, and basically said to put whatever down—they will sign anything."

IDP's "Achilles Heel"

It's a shame that virtually everyone recognizes the need to lie about experience units in certain categories in order to meet the minimums. An architect told me, "There's no way to finish IDP if you don't fabricate some of your experience." He was right! -- Former intern

[The most negative aspect of internship] is having to lie in order to fulfill [the] requirements.
-- Current intern

I could have put down anything and they would have signed off on it.
-- Former Intern

[One of the weaknesses of IDP is that it's] too easy to falsify reports.
-- Member board administrator

The coerced intern who hoped "NCARB wouldn't figure it out" if he decided to fabricate his experience is in better shape than he probably knows. The truth is that it is too easy to falsify IDP reports. There are a couple of reasons for this. First, for a program designed to protect the "health, safety, and welfare of the public" by improving training, IDP is marked by a surprising lack of regulations, procedures, and sanctions providing for the verification of the accuracy of records. At this time IDP administration contains no provisions (fiscally or procedurally) for monitoring the accuracy of reports, and until recently, no formal sanctions for those who falsify documents.⁴ When fraud is discovered, it is by attentive administrators who pick up "irregularities" while routinely processing paperwork. Given that oversight is serendipitous rather than planned, the only type of fraud uncovered is the most egregious and intern-centered. Inflation of hours, creative categorization, and falsification that happens when employers are negligent ("they'll sign anything"), or when interns and employers cooperatively "fabricate" experience will go undetected. It is not surprising then that NCARB administrators could remember uncovering less than twenty cases of falsification in the program's history. (See Table I for a graphical representation of possible types of falsification and their relationship to intent.)

In addition to minimal internal verification, NCARB has little to no presence at the sites of actual training. Beyond the periodic call to an employer to verify a suspicious signature or a strangely "even" number of training units, NCARB conducts no active investigations in the field to determine the accuracy of reports.

Nor could they easily do so. NCARB's public image among practitioners is already one of a slow and unresponsive bureau-

Interns	Employers	NCARB	AIA
Making an adequate to good salary	Cost containment by keeping wages low		Protect the interests of registered architects and architectural firms
Getting quality & diverse experience –to complete IDP –to increase skills –to increase ability to pass ARE	Cost containment by –minimizing training costs –reducing turnover	Expand IDP for –increased revenue –prestige –regulatory power –cost containment –encourage registration	–cost containment –encourage registration
Getting interesting & fulfilling work	–Cost containment by encouraging quick, efficient work –Reducing legal risks	–Improve public image –Maintain good relations with individual architects	–Improve public image –Maintain good relations with individual architects
		–Protect the title of "architect"	–Protect the title of "architect"

Table 2. The various—and often conflicting—interests of IDP actors

cracy. A case in point is the particularly biting (and at times hysteric) expose recently published in *Architecture* magazine likening NCARB to an old-style Soviet agency (Adams 1999). While the FDA may require medical companies to actively audit the offices of doctors participating in their clinical trials, it is difficult to imagine NCARB “agents” out in the field pouring over firms’ time cards.

Second, the administration of IDP is conspicuously fragmented and marked by groups with markedly contradictory interests. The primary responsibility for dispensing information about the program to students and new interns is left to local and state AIA components and to the schools of architecture. The core of the program—the actual “training”—occurs in the plethora of individual firms throughout the nation. (Indeed, the diversity is astounding given that *any* registered architect and many affiliated professionals can sponsor an intern for IDP.) Finally, development, oversight, and administration are handled by NCARB. (See Table 2 for a comparison of the various groups’ conflicting interests.)

Alone, this might not be a problem. There are instances where diversity and fragmented, local control can be fruitful—the relative independence of universities in the U.S. is a good example. Problems emerge when the constellation of respective interests confounds the need for coordination. If the need for coordination is high, the robustness of a program is undermined when conflicting interests abound.

Cuff (1991:134) finds contradiction almost a defining characteristic of architectural internship and the profession in general:

Economic rationales generally outweigh the professional duty to shape interns’ training: offices give interns exposure to a narrow domain to keep training costs to a minimum; the intern works at those tasks that he or she is already best prepared to undertake, interns are given tasks for which errors are not costly and which require minimum supervision.

The fundamental contradiction sits between the pull of business needs and the vision of the noble professional serving both the community and his or her art. Ironically, IDP is administratively split along the fault line of this contradiction. The goals—shaped from the side that represents service and quality—are administered by NCARB, the organization that is entrusted with overseeing the “health, safety, and welfare” of the public. These are the interests of quality control and effective training. From this perspective, the *raison d’être* of internship is fleshing out the training of novices. In contrast, the *practice* of the program—its reality—is located in diverse firms, situated in various contexts of uncertainty, productive capacity, and competition. The interests of the trainers—the employers—are those of cost containment and efficiency. While the relatively rudimentary skills of interns are the impetus for internship, this same lack of experience is what pushes employers to pay poorly, to limit the interns’ involvement in crucial tasks, and thus to circumscribe their training.

The constellation of contradictions is even more complex when those of interns are considered. NCARB and state boards are two of the most powerful “gatekeepers” in the profession with the goals of protecting both the value of the term “archi-

tect” and the public by keeping unqualified practitioners out of the field. In contrast, interns, as applicants for admission into a field that pays poorly at the lower levels, are interested in climbing the ladder as easily and quickly as possible.

The Relevance of Criminological Theories

What then is the likely outcome of this scenario, a program which is administered and “consumed” by groups with conflicting interests where little independent oversight exists and violations carry few if any sanctions?

Sociological theories of deviance offer some insight into both the causes and the effects of the falsification of internship documents. Interested in the delinquency of minority and poor youths, Robert Merton (1964) sought an explanation that located their deviance in its social and economic context. Unlike theorists who suggested that these youths simply did not share the dominant American values of hard work and material success, in his *strain theory*, Merton theorized that they were instead caught in the contradiction between the dominant values and the realities of differential and unequal opportunities. Denied access to legitimate work settings and training (and thus lacking legitimate means to pursue the American dream of material success), the youths simply “innovated.” With few employment opportunities, they sold drugs; with scant chance for a quality education, they learned the rules of “the street.” Merton suggested that deviant youths are not acting in opposition to dominant culture so much as attempting, in the face of frustration, to meet its expectations with an improvised—yet illegitimate—set of tools.

One thing that strain theory does not fully articulate, and an important issue to the present problem, is the impact of potential sanctions. What is the possible effect if interns and their employers know that “no one is minding the store?” In this case, rational choice theory (e.g., Clarke & Cornish, 1985) offers some insight. This theory posits that deviance is the result of a limited but rational calculation of costs and benefits. Illustrative here is the case of the intern whose employer threatened to withhold his signature on IDP forms if the intern left. The choice to forge his employer’s signature may be the most rational option given the relatively low probability of detection, and the economic and personal costs of staying with the employer. Thus, in understanding deviance, we must also uncover the calculus of costs and benefits for an individual in a particular context.

In appraising this calculus one needs not only to consider the *monetary* costs and benefits but the impact the behavior may have on the individual’s identity and reputation. To lie on employment forms, for example, may clash with an individual’s closely-held notions of justice and fair play. We suspect that a good number of interns are falsifying documents but that they also see nothing wrong with this behavior. They may still consider themselves to be “good people.” Indeed, deviance research shows that many convicted offenders hold onto the fundamental belief that they did nothing wrong or that there were legitimate justifications for their behavior (Dabney 1995; Jesilow,

Pontell and Geis 1993; Benson 1985; Scully and Marolla 1984; Sykes and Matza 1957). The process of this “image management” is the subject of Sykes and Matza’s theory of *neutralization*. In this process behavior is justified by,

words and phrases that excuse or justify lawbreaking behavior, such as claiming an action was ‘self-defense.’ Unlike rationalizations, which come after an act to avoid culpability and consequences,... neutralizations come after contemplating an act to allow oneself to commit it...(Lanier and Henry 1998)

There are five primary and common forms of neutralizations and our data reveals that several are in use by interns and employers. An intern or employer who justifies falsifying documents because IDP is “just paperwork,” for example, is using the technique called “denial of injury.” To justify falsification because one believes that IDP unreasonably burdens interns and employers is an example of “condemning the condemners.”

The problem with the process of neutralization is that it may result in *drift* and a hardening of the attitudes of deviance (Minor 1984). Repeating the suspect behavior becomes easier as the neutralizations become integrated into an individual’s moral vocabulary. And the use of neutralization techniques is a *cultural* process. As more individuals successfully engage in the use of a particular technique, the result may be a subculture of deviance—one where the behavior is normative rather than deviant.

Conclusions and Future Directions

Architectural internship consists of two layers. The first is the actual training one receives from one’s employers. The quality of this training varies widely and seems to “rest on the good will and the resources of the employer and the assertiveness of the intern” (Boyer & Mitgang, 1996:120). The second layer is the IDP—a formalized administrative system of record-keeping. At its best, IDP makes explicit the range of experience interns need to gain and may be used by interns to lobby for more diversified experience. At its worse, IDP breeds a dangerous climate of fraud in settings where the requirements are in conflict with economic and political exigencies. It may also provide unscrupulous employers with an additional stick with which to coerce and exploit interns.

A study of falsification—in addition to revealing crucial issues of internship, the production of the profession, and the power/impotence of regulation—has some important implications. First, given that internship is a crucial site of socialization into the profession (Cuff, 1989), an apprenticeship where the widespread (and thus by implication a *legitimized*) practice of falsification is at play has serious implications for the ethical health of the profession. In addition, falsification undermines the validity of IDP; if falsification is widespread modifications of the form of IDP seem fruitless. Perhaps, as one intern suggested, a study of IDP is “like arranging chairs on the deck of the Titanic.”

As we have outlined, viewed through the lens of theories of deviance it is easy to see how falsification would be a problem

in the IDP. We do not, however, have solid empirical evidence of its prevalence nor the use of various forms of neutralization techniques; nor do we know the distribution of types of falsification nor the extent of employers' collusion. The data gathered reported here is suggestive rather than comprehensive. As one intern who participated in the AIEP stated bluntly,

How hard is it to get your employer to sign off on something you haven't done? That's one question you failed to ask. It's anonymous so why not ask some tough questions, i.e., 'How often have you lied and cheated on filling out the time sheet.'

We have seriously considered this intern's challenge and are designing a follow-up survey and in-depth interview schedule to explore this issue in more detail. With this information we hope to provide a needed sociological view of the process of architectural internship as a means for informing valid policy and programs.

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Notes

- ¹ An overview of the results of this project is available from the authors. A summary of the final report is also available on line at www.montana.edu/wwwaiep.
- ² We have engaged in many conversations with individuals who are intimately involved in its history and present state. Information on the history of IDP was gained from formal interviews with Robert Rosenfeld, Director of Student and Intern Services at NCARB, who has been with IDP from its inception; Marcia Sherrick, Assistant Director of Student and Intern Services at NCARB; Lenore Lucey, Executive Vice President of NCARB; William Houseman, NCARB Publications Consultant; and Carl Sapers, NCARB legal counsel; among others.
- ³ There is an impression among some who are associated with the current administration and oversight of IDP that an NCARB-sponsored "task analysis" conducted in the 1980s for purposes of evaluating the ARE was used in the design of IDP. We have found no evidence to support this claim. NCARB is currently commissioning a new "practice analysis" to be used to re-evaluate the ARE; however, if the charges to the oversight committee are any indication, its application to IDP, if any, will be tangential (source: NCARB 1999-2000 Committee Charges).
- ⁴ In the spring of 1998, the staff brought to the attention of the NCARB Professional Conduct Committee six fairly egregious cases of outright falsification of full records. Responding to this committee's recommendations, the NCARB Board of Directors approved procedural rules providing—for the first time—for formal sanctions given verified acts of falsification (NCARB News Clips, July 8, 1998). Interestingly, these rules only apply to interns (no provisions for employer collusion are included) and have not been published in any forum easily available to interns. In addition, as a response to the issues addresses in our research, in the spring of 2000 NCARB will institute formalized record-checking routines. The proposed routines, however, will not address the problem of the abusive or collaborative employer.