

Summary of Administrators Conference Business Lunch Discussions

Over 80 schools were represented at the November 11 Administrators Luncheon, including international schools, community colleges and nonaccredited programs. Each table was given a set of questions for discussion, led by an ACSA board member. Questions focused on current status of program admissions, employment issues, and accreditation issues.

Admissions: Participants gave a very mixed picture on student applications and enrollments, which were up in some places and down in others. No clear trends at the undergraduate or graduate level emerged, although the pivotal role of international students filling positions, particularly at full tuition, became clear.

Employment: Overall schools reported that hiring has picked up, and not just because of international opportunities. Schools clearly realize that coming out of this reset the architecture industry—and hence job prospects for professional-program graduates—will not be the same as before 2008. The landscape for careers is broader, less determined than before, because architecture firms provide a broader array of services requiring different skill sets and because students are being forced to find different employment opportunities. These new opportunities have already spawned nonprofessional degree and certificate programs, which, many schools reported, help keep enrollment and applications from dropping. Finally, schools reported that the job market has created a class of students that are more entrepreneurial: seeking dual degrees, even starting their own businesses based on their own work experience.

Accreditation: With the prospect of another review of NAAB Conditions at hand, respondents were concerned about major changes to accreditation requirements. They agreed the accreditation review process needs to be shorter and less costly, learning from other disciplinary models such as landscape architecture and engineering.

University budgets are being cut, with no let up in demands for accountability from all constituencies, while at the same time programs recognize they must keep up with the evolving nature of professional practice. Schools agreed that accreditation does not, and should not, stimulate innovation in schools. Accreditation conditions are seen as trailing indicators, largely because of the nature of review of minimum standards and the inability of changes in the profession to be reflected in the Conditions. Many respondents indicated that innovations in curricula happen outside of NAAB in post- or nonprofessional degree and certificate programs. As one note put it, “NAAB is behind the schools and the schools are behind the profession. That said, it seems that the schools are moving ahead.”

Finally, a clear and chronic tension between specificity and generality emerged. Many participants expressed concern that there are too many Conditions or SPCs. They overdetermine curricula and force visiting teams into a checkbox mentality. The alternative is an accreditation process that relies more on a program review process that is more art than science: where a team has fewer specific criteria to review and more latitude in rendering judgment on how the program’s evidence meets with Conditions. This apparent preference, however, includes its own requirement, commonly stated at the tables: what is needed are teams that are better and more consistently trained.

1. How are enrollments, applications, and yields?

Very mixed response on enrollments, applications, and yields. The role of international students filling positions, particularly at full freight, emerged. At the undergraduate level,

student interest is still strong, although they may be less interested in committing to the major as early. It was noted in several cases that although applications may be down, there are far more students applying for a limited number of seats. Very few comments about lower quality in students being admitted.

2. *Where are recent graduates finding work? What kinds of firms? What locations?*

Overall schools reported hiring has picked up. International opportunities have helped but not uniformly so. There is increased pressure for unpaid internships and other compromises for work. Students are finding jobs in new areas. These are seen less like the periphery of the traditional profession and more the new wave of opportunities. In multiple cases, these new opportunities have spawned nonprofessional degree and certificate programs. The job market has created a class of students that are more entrepreneurial: seeking dual degrees, starting own businesses based on their own work experience.

3. *With the growth in job opportunities abroad, are you seeking more International opportunities for students while in school?*

Despite the leading assumption that most work in firms is abroad, there does not seem to be a rapid move for schools to change curricula or program opportunities in this way. A reason is that most schools already have these opportunities. Cultivating new ones can be dependent on the faculty, and are generally expensive for both the program and the student.

4. *What role does accreditation play in your program/school/college's multi-year planning process (including faculty hiring) ?*

Responses to this question were highly mixed. At many schools accreditation is key to the planning process and plays a central role in faculty hiring. Accreditation is often a lever, or even cudgel, used both by administration and faculty to spur and resist change. As discussed below, schools agreed that NAAB is neither the cause nor the obstacle to program evolution, much less innovation.

5. *What methods of assessing outcomes of your graduates are you using? How directly linked are they to NAAB standards?*

This item was not sufficiently or consistently discussed at each table to yield a general statement.

6. *Do NAAB Conditions present obstacles for your program to innovate?*

Respondents at the tables agreed that NAAB does not, and should not, create innovation at the schools. NAAB Conditions are seen as trailing indicators, largely because of the nature of review of minimum standards and the inability of changes in the profession to be reflected in Conditions.

The majority of respondents indicated that innovation in curricula happen outside of NAAB in post- or nonprofessional degree and certificate programs. As one note put it, "NAAB is behind the schools and the schools are behind the profession. That said, it seems that the schools are moving ahead."

A clear tension between specificity and generality emerged that will likely continue to remain chronic. Many participants expressed concern that there are too many Conditions or SPCs. They overdetermine curricula and force visiting teams into a checkbox mentality. The alternative is an accreditation process that relies more on the art of program review, where a team has fewer specific criteria to review and more latitude in rendering judgment on how the program's evidence meets with Conditions. Couple that with a growing demand for a shorter, less costly process, and what is needed are teams that are better, more consistently trained.

7. What are the most helpful NAAB Conditions and Procedures? What are the most onerous?

Few comments indicated helpful Conditions. Concern was expressed over how difficult it is to move a 2-year M.Arch program through the NAAB process, because there is so little focus on the undergraduate portion. This binds programs into forcing so much required content into the required courses.

It is generally accepted that fewer rules will create more innovation.

8. What procedural changes would make the process less burdensome?

Shorter visits, more digital review, less onerous preparation (such as the faculty matrix) will not jeopardize the quality of the process or the schools' graduates.

There is an art to program review, led and optimized by a strong and experienced chair.

Fewer criteria or standards means less check box mentality, means more reliance on the art of review

More training of teams able to use consistent judgment. Reliance on a strong chair is central.

9. What is the single most important issue your program faces currently?

Top: Less money, more work.

Second: Supply of students. International students help, but will this dry up? Community colleges present opportunities for many programs. Financial aid constraints directly affect supply.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE VALUE OF ARCHITECTURE UPHeld BY REGULATION?

Good portrait of state of accreditation in schools:

On accreditation, generally:

- faculty doesn't like accreditation
- no real relation to context
- accreditation is a mark of pride [in multi-unit colleges with unaccredited programs]
- accreditation is more about policing our work than it is about understanding what we're trying to do as a program
- half our faculty uses accreditation to resist change
- most programs see accreditation as a chance to leverage resources
- every team has its own personality and agenda, no matter what its members' experience with education

Good summary of general vs. specific issues:

a) The specificity of the NAAB Conditions and SPCs seem to deflect attention to them rather than enabling focus on more pertinent issues. On the other side – at least one school indicated that they find themselves working on the same issues that teams have identified. Some discussion about the strategic planning and perspectives conditions – but didn't seem that many schools used these well to portray unique identity.

b) General consensus that accreditation needs to provide for greater latitude in school cultures, phrased more generally and less specifically, they (Conditions and SPCs) should be broad enough to be addressed in multiple ways