

Contact: Diana Gonzalez

LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE PROGRAM
ACCREDITATION REPORT AT IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY

Action Requested: Receive the accreditation report for the Bachelor of Landscape Architecture (BLA) in the College of Design at Iowa State University.

Executive Summary: The program (1) underwent a self-study that addressed the standards defined by the accrediting body; and (2) had an on-site visit by peer evaluators. The program was accredited for the maximum six-year period through December 2013. This accreditation report addresses the Board of Regents Strategic Plan objective (1.1) to “offer high-quality programs through ongoing program improvement for undergraduate, graduate, professional, and non-degree students and special school students.”

Background:

- ◇ **Description of program.** The Bachelor of Landscape Architecture program is a five-year professional degree program. Students gain strong communication skills, a working knowledge of plants and construction, and an understanding of the way natural, social, and cultural systems influence design. Types of projects include residential; parks and recreation; streetscapes and public spaces; and historic preservation and restoration.
- ◇ **Purpose of Accreditation.** An accredited educational program is recognized by its peers as having met national standards for its development and evaluation.
- ◇ **Accrediting Agency.** The accrediting body is the Landscape Architecture Accrediting Board (LAAB) of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA).
- ◇ **Review Process.** The self-study prepared by the Landscape Architecture Program contained the responses to the appropriate standards required by the accrediting body – program mission and objectives; governance/administration; professional curriculum; faculty; students; alumni; practitioners; relation to the university and the community; and facilities, equipment and information systems.
- ◇ **On-Site Team Report.** In November 2007, the visiting team determined that the Landscape Architecture Program met the requirements for accredited status, although two standards (out of nine) were met with recommendation.
- ◇ **Sample Strengths Identified by the Visiting Team.**
 - ☑ “Very qualified, committed, and professionally diverse faculty.”
 - ☑ “Successful implementation of the overhaul of the BLA curriculum to provide for interdisciplinary work, individual exploration, and enhanced travel opportunities.”
 - ☑ “Supportive Landscape Architecture Practitioner’s Advisory Council.”
 - ☑ “Central administration expressing strong support for the long term success of the BLA program.”
 - ☑ “Particularly innovative curriculum initiative – the Savannah Studio – that serves to accelerate the indoctrination of the beginning student into the Landscape Architecture program and profession.”

◆ Standards met with recommendation.

- ☑ Program mission and objectives. “The team recommends that the BLA faculty establish a systematic assessment process to ensure/certify that each student has accomplished the curricula learning objectives and, therefore, is prepared for eventual professional practice.”

The department acknowledges a need for new methods of student outcomes assessment. Currently, student performance is evaluated in many ways, both formative and summative. Students in the first year design core are required to develop and submit a full portfolio of work which is then reviewed by a faculty panel to assess student performance and selection into one of the department programs. The design disciplines have a long tradition of ongoing assessment in desk reviews, project reviews, and end of semester reviews in its studio environment, and papers, exams and other instruments in other classes. The curriculum also requires a formal internship or equivalent experience in the fourth year that provides feedback on student performance prior to the final year. Students in their final semester elect option studios that provide interdisciplinary practice experience. There is no focused “capstone” studio from soup to nuts. The department has opted not to follow that path for various reasons, including the diverse types of practice that students encounter. However, other forms of summative evaluation prior to graduation will be considered in curricular discussions. In addition, there are plans to formalize the alumni survey to better track alumni assessment of the department’s preparation for practice.

- ☑ Governance/administration. “The team recommends that the BLA program present in much more detail the abbreviated curriculum option leading to the first professional degree into its formal program descriptions and develop a rationale that the degree requirements for the BLA degree are met.”

The department recognizes that appropriate documentation was not provided in the self-study regarding the concurrent BLA/MLA option offered to first professional graduate students. While this option has been in place in the department for several decades, it is not adequately documented or disseminated. After the visit, the Director of Graduate Education drafted a BLA/MLA audit form to document program requirements for each student. The audit form identifies the BLA requirements and identifies courses that meet the requirements or substitutions. This will become part of the advising package and part of the student’s permanent record. Explanation of the concurrent BLA/MLA is based on recognition that students in this category are entering with an earned undergraduate degree and that many of the general education requirements can be waived. In applying this audit to several recent graduates (including those who do not finish the masters, but remain in the BLA), the meeting of standards is demonstrated.

With the recent adoption of the College design core, the particular demands of the second year traveling studio, and the required semester off-campus, the concurrent BLA/MLA option is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. During the past few years, faculty have examined changes to the masters program, including making it a non-professional degree, and developing and seeking accreditation for a first professional masters degree. Continued discussion in this area is expected.

- ◆ Suggestions for improvement.
 - ☑ “The BLA faculty should reshape many of the program objectives to reflect what students should be able to do when they graduate from the program.”

This is an ongoing process.
 - ☑ “A more proactive mechanism should be developed to assist the junior faculty in their preparation for the process of achieving tenure and eventual promotion.”

Faculty provide annual reports and receive annual reviews by the department chair. The department governance has a standing promotion and tenure committee that leads a third year pre-tenure review, in addition to tenure and post-tenure reviews. The college and university have a mentoring program, but it cannot substitute for discipline-specific tenure advising. The new chair is implementing a more structured mentoring program to assist junior faculty. At times, the relatively unique situation of having faculty on extension appointments creates stress in faculty due to complementary, but administratively separate, review procedures. This is being addressed in the mentoring program as well as efforts at greater community building between extension and academic units.
 - ☑ “The current evaluation and programmatic review process should be strengthened to establish whether the curricular elements and objectives produce satisfactory outcomes.”

This suggestion was addressed in recommendation one.
 - ☑ “The department should actively strive to increase diversity among its undergraduate student population, staking out a position of leadership that helps diversify the profession, especially in its region.”

This is a challenge faced by the entire profession. It is particularly challenging in the Midwest (especially Iowa) because of its demographics, and institutionally, with lower than average graduation rates. Without greater diversity in the profession to demonstrate career possibilities, the department’s best efforts will be to recruit a more diverse faculty as a necessary first step.
 - ☑ “The BLA program should strive for more consistent communication with its alumni (as well as practitioners) by utilizing the department’s website more effectively and explore other opportunities for communication such as information on department offerings through mailings and ‘email blasts’.”

The need for ongoing development and maintenance of the department’s communication needs is also recognized. The department has initiated an administrative approach to managing the departmental website as well as a series of “round table” meetings with practitioners and alumni to open channels of communication. More regular communications through email lists will also be developed.
- ◆ Accreditation Status. In April 2008, the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board awarded accreditation to the Landscape Architecture Program at ISU for a six-year period through December 2013 subject to a review of annual reports and maintenance of good standing.