The Cost of Becoming and Remaining an Architect in the United States

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Abstract: The American architecture profession comprises students, non-licensed practitioners, registered architects, and retired architects. In 2024 these groups included approximately 116,005 licensees, 155,000 billable architectural practitioners working in offices (including about 105,000 licensed architects), and 33,000 students[1]. Throughout their careers, architectural practitioners will interact with and experience a variety of institutions during their education (NAAB, ACSA, AIAS), professional interactions (AIA in both national and local chapters, NOMA, ALA) and licensure (NCARB and local licensing boards)[2].

Architects and other practitioners collectively contribute to funding approximately 60% of the funding for the distributed network of institutions that regulate, represent, certify, and accredit the profession, spending approximately $64,000 in subscriptions, membership fees, and licensing fees during a typical 50+ year career. While organizational revenues and institutional operations support the broader professional infrastructure, the cost of maintaining sustained participation within these systems is not insignificant in comparison to architectural salaries across different stages of practice. These costs may help explain why so many practitioners choose not to participate.

This paper approaches the subject as a study of institutional structure, examining the relationships between organizations, revenue, and professional participation through publicly available data, measurable financial patterns, and comparative analysis.

1 – Architectural Constituents and the System of Organizations

American architects are a relatively small population as a profession: in 2024 there were only 116,005 licensed architects[3] serving a country of approximately 342 million citizens, or one architect for every 3,000 Americans.[4] In that same year, there were 866,000 practicing physicians (one per 400 citizens)[5] and 1.3 million lawyers (one per 260); there were far more lawyers (186,000) in California than architects in the entire United States.[6] Yet despite these small numbers, the architectural "system" is a complex of multiple organizations and jurisdictional footprints, representing different and sometimes competing missions, target markets, constituents, and geographic reach.

Interaction with these various organizations follows the trajectory of an architect's career. While that route may follow a variety of paths, for purposes of this study we generalize the architect's journey to include the following:

- Education (student): Attendance in an accredited architectural program, requiring between five and eight years of study.

- Training (pre-licensed architectural designer): Working in a practice accumulating necessary experience for licensure, an average of six years.
- Professional practice (licensed architect): Working as an architect, with the rights and responsibilities available as a registered practitioner, approximately four decades.
- Retirement (emeritus architect): Reaching or at retirement, with license and professional association status in "emeritus" mode. Most practitioners in this status pay substantially reduced fees and dues, or none at all, and their impact is omitted from this analysis.

An architect will likely interact with in some fashion some or all the following organizations exclusively dedicated to the profession, listed here with their *mission statements*. They were chosen as subjects of this study because of their direct support of the various phases of a professional career.[7]

1. Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture (ACSA): "*ACSA is the voice of architectural education. We convene and advocate for our field – for the benefit of our members and for the built environment.*"[8] (1 organization comprised of approximately 250 schools)
2. National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB): "*NAAB develops and maintains an accreditation system in professional degree education that enhances the value, relevance, and effectiveness of the profession of architecture.*"[9] (1 organization)
3. The American Institute of Architects, National Chapter (AIA): "*AIA drives positive change through the power of design and focused advocacy.*"[10] (1 organization)
4. American Institute of Architecture Students (AIAS): "*Advancing leadership, design, and service among architecture students.*"[11] (1 national organization supporting approximately 130 university-based chapters)
5. AIA – State and local chapters, depending on geographic location, for example: "*AIA Connecticut is the voice of the architectural profession, empowering its members to lead in service to society"*[12] (Approximately 217 local and international chapters)
6. Association of Licensed Architects (ALA): "*The Association of Licensed Architects (ALA) supports architects and professions related to architecture, throughout their careers.*"[13] (1 organization comprised of "several hundred members" although specific data is not available)
7. National Organization of Minority Architects (NOMA): *"NOMA's mission, rooted in a rich legacy of activism, is to empower our local chapters and membership to foster justice and equity in communities of color through outreach, community advocacy, professional development and design excellence."*[14] (1 national organization supporting 46 local chapters and 128 student chapters)
8. National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB): "*NCARB, in collaboration with licensing boards, facilitates the licensure and credentialing of architects to protect the health, safety, and welfare of the public.*"[15] (1 organization)
9. State Architectural Licensing Boards manage licensing in US jurisdictions. In California (where one of the authors is licensed) the mission statement reads "*The California Architects Board protects consumers by establishing standards for professional qualifications, ensuring*

CorreCcompetence through examinations, setting practice standards, and enforcing the Architects Practice Act."[16] (55 organizations/boards including 50 U.S. states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, the U.S. Virgin Islands and the Northern Mariana Islands)

Computing the costs of this system paid by an architect over her career using practice demographics, which are incomplete at best (see Endnote 1). In 2024 those participants included, with substantial overlap between them: 33,000 students supported by 7,000 faculty; 126,841 NCARB record holders (people somewhere in NCARB's system leading to licensure) including 51,500 with licenses and NCARB certificates; almost 101,000 members of the American Institute of Architects including the national, regional, state and local chapters of whom approximately 65,000 are licensed architects and another 28,000 non-licensed members; 116,005 licensed architects holding an additional 150,638 reciprocal licenses; and 206,000 people working in architectural offices, of whom approximately 155,000 are architectural professionals working on billable work. Unfortunately, no single source of integrated information is available that can precisely determine the relationships and overlaps in these demographics.

Figure 1 summarizes the coverage, number of constituents, number of components, and primary and secondary focus during a career of each of these organization categories. While each has a primary mission in the realms of education, post-graduate training, professional practice, or licensure, there are substantial overlaps in priorities, jurisdiction, and focus. ACSA supports schools of architecture, some of which are accredited by NAAB; NCARB coordinates licensing requirements for state boards that include, in some cases, NAAB-accredited degrees provided by these schools. AIA, NOMA, and ALA, all organizations that mean to support the professional writ large, have tiered structures with national, local, and student chapters, and broad remits.

2 – The Cost of the System of Organizations

Information about the finances of subject organizations was researched primarily through federal tax filings, particularly the Form 990, which is required of all non-profits and publicly available. There is little detail in a typical Form 990, making it difficult to determine precise revenue sources and expenses, particularly of local AIA chapters. Similarly, scant data is available about the operating revenue/expenses of state licensing boards. The overall financial contours of the system were therefore extrapolated by combining public tax information with participant demographics and dues/fees data.

The overview of this data can be found in *Figure 2*, which summarizes the general demographics and financial dynamics of the system, and indicates that in the aggregate approximately $194 million dollars was spent in 2024 in the overall support of the architecture profession. Of that amount, 62% was paid by the constituents themselves ($120.3 million), with the balance of revenue generated from other sources peripheral to the profession itself—affiliate memberships, conventions, publications, advertising, etc.

Combining professionals working in offices in billable positions with the balance of licensed architects not working in firms, plus students, and faculty, results in a total constituency of approximately 223,000 potential paying professional and para-professional constituents of this

system.[17] With a combined expense of almost $194.5 million, this is approximately $860 spent per person, per year.

Given that most of the time and energy of practice is during the professional phase of one's career, it's unsurprising that professional associations and license-related programs comprise the most cost. This distribution is described in *Figure 3*, showing that professional associations comprise about 63% of total spending, and licensing boards plus NCARB another 34%. AIA National is almost 35% of the total alone, and NCARB more than 20%. Education-related organizations comprise 2.4% or about $4.7 million to support approximately 40,000 students and faculty, a very small component of the overall cost of the profession relative to other organizations.

3 – The Cost to the Architect

The career-cost analysis during an architect's career suggests that during a putative 54-year total of active education and practice, an architect can expect to pay about $64,000 to the system of architectural organizations, as analyzed in *Figure 4*. The table cross-references this journey through three phases (education, pre-professional, and licensed practitioner) and associated annual costs, with 65% spent on professional associations ($41,000) and another 35% or $22,000 on licensing costs. Not surprisingly, costs per year jump substantially in each career phase, starting at $55 per year during school, $653 per year as a pre-professional (including costs of the licensing exam), and then $1,467 per year for the remaining 41 years of practice. Over the course of an entire career, an architect can expect to pay almost $1,200 a year toward these professional endeavors.

AIA compensation data suggest that architects in 2024 earned an average computed gross income of $131,000 during their careers, and thus spend, on average, 1.1% of that gross income, and 1.6% on an average of $94,000 of after-tax income, on architectural organizations. While this number seems minimal, a yearly cost of over $1,400 during employment is formidable, particularly early in a career, when that expense can be as high as 1.8% of an "Architect I" salary of $76,500. [18]

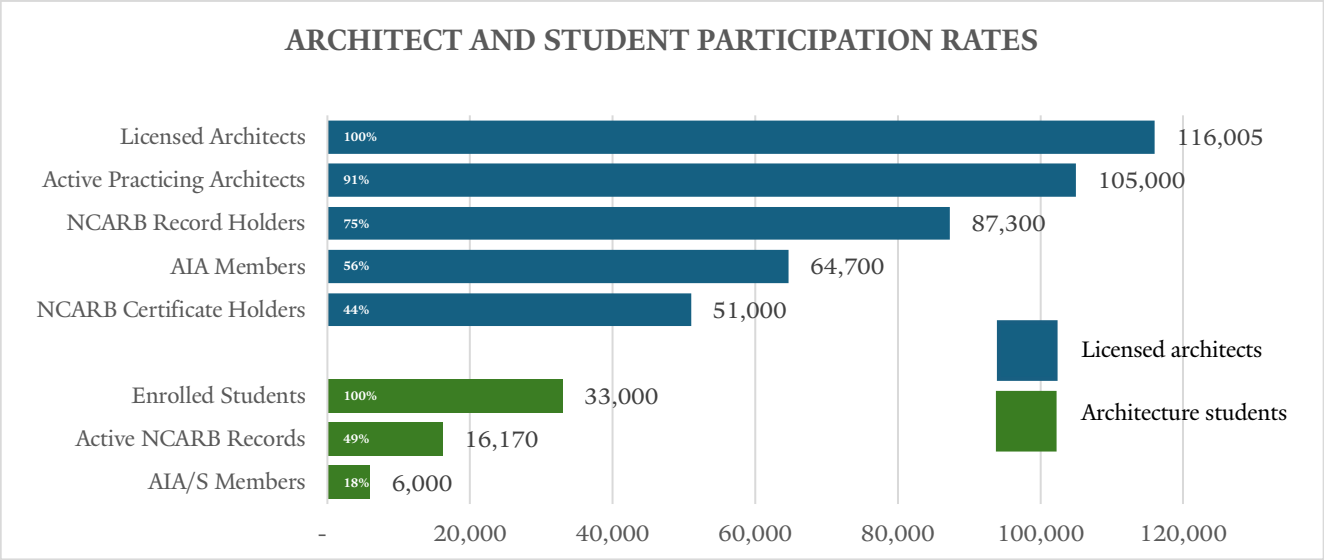
The largest elements of these costs are AIA dues and licensure fees including state charges and NCARB support. More than $25,000 is paid by a practitioner in AIA dues (some of which may be covered by the employer) and almost $15,000 to NCARB to establish an NCARB record, take the exam, and then pay yearly subscription fees to maintain that record. This number is almost four times the $3,700 needed to pay state registration fees over a career.

4 – Rates of Participation

As NCARB and AIA comprise most of the cost of architectural organizations, it is illuminating to evaluate how many qualified constituents of each, by career phase, choose to join or opt out of each. These numbers are described in *Figure 5*. In 2024, about half of architecture students elected to begin their NCARB journey, and less than a quarter joined a student chapter of AIAS.

Entering their professional careers as unlicensed practitioners, everyone pays NCARB to get on track for the licensing exam; 80% chose associate membership in AIA; non-licensed billable staff (who never intend to be licensed) join at a rate of 6%. Once licensed, most of the country's architects have an active NCARB record, and approximately half join the AIA, whether in a firm or not. Membership is likely higher in large firms (where dues may be paid by the practice) and much lower in smaller or sole-practitioner firms.

5 – Commentary



The system of organizations in American architecture is complex, with various entities assuming both explicit and implicit roles. While each distinct component operates in its respective lane (education, professional support and advocacy, and licensure), there are significant overlaps of strategy, ambition, influence, and in some cases, operation. The challenge is well-illustrated by the recent controversy over the funding of NAAB and the years-long and ultimately fruitless negotiations between ACSA, NAAB, AIA, and NCARB over NAAB's funding model, which was, before the crisis, shared to reduce the financial burdens on the schools. When the organizations failed to resolve this relatively small budget change (less than $1 million) the schools--and therefore, the students—assumed the costs, hardly an optimal result.[19] NCARB, which chose to end funding of NAAB, has begun an effort to create paths to licensure that circumvent NAAB-accredited schools entirely, based on its view of what constitutes competency in architecture.[20] Since NCARB is the second largest entity in the system by revenue and has the narrowest mission, this effort to redefine the profession itself, absent (for example) the AIA, is both unfortunate and unsettling.

These examples of strategically ambiguous decision-making and control speak to larger questions of whether a relatively small profession like architecture could operate differently under a redesigned system of organizations. While the cost of participation is less than 2% of earnings, that so many constituents of this system choose not to take part—from students to seasoned licensed practitioners—raises further questions about whether the profession perceives the value,

financially or otherwise, of these institutions, and whether that value is being properly explained and delivered. Do those who do participate carry the financial burden of those who do not, even though in some sense the efforts of these organizations benefit the entire profession? Would higher participation rates lower the costs for all through greater efficiency, and result in higher accountability that might make the system more effective?

Finally, is this system of organizations the infrastructure our discipline truly needs as it evolves to respond to the important questions of the 21st century, including the challenges of globalization, climate change, and artificial intelligence, to name just a few? Supporting the geographically, demographically, and politically diverse profession is not a simple task. If one were to wipe the slate clean, and based on current demand, the needs of our discipline, a shared view of the future, and $200 million dollars a year, would a different, more streamlined and effective structure result?

End of Text

Organization	Coverage	Constituents	Number of Components	Education	Training	Professional	Licensure
ACSA	National	33,000 students and 7,000 faculty	1	■			□
NAAB	National	33,558 students and 7,564 faculty	1	■			□
AIA National	National	100,774 members including approximately 65,000 licensed architects	1		□	■	
AIA Components	Local	100,774 members including approximately 65,000 licensed architects	217		□	■	
AIAS	National/Local	6,500 dues-paying members (~30,000 students represented)	130	■	□		
NOMA	National/Local	3,600 members	156		□	■	
ALA	National	Membership not publicly disclosed	1		□	■	
NCARB	National	116,005 licensed architect and 39,500 licensure candidates	55		□	□	■
State Licensing Boards	Local	266,643 total license holdings (base and reciprocal)	55		□		■
			Primary role	■			
			Supporting role	□			

Figure 1 *– A professional's route through the profession's organizations, by career phase and showing summary mission statements of each organization.*

Organization	Participation Model	# of Licensed Architects	# of Participants	Participant type	Annual Revenue	Annual Expense	Fee per participant	Total Fees Collected	Notes	Accuracy
ACSA	By institution	n/a	230	schools	2,497,844	2,580,468	5,931	1,364,157	0,1	High
NAAB	By institution	n/a	176	schools	1,470,191	2,154,044	5,680	1,119,787	2	High
AIA National	Membership	65,915	100,774	members	70,085,469	68,575,808	229	22,714,922	3	High
AIA Other Components	Membership	-	100,774	members	-				4	High
↳ AIA State		64,698	95,030		34,596,967	33,632,979	195	18,485,048		High
↳ AIA "Big Sibs"		28,664	7,937		18,784,883	19,611,789	317	12,714,913		High
↳ AIA Local Chapters		-			347,131	344,940	226	155		Medium
AIAS	Membership	n/a	33,000	members	788,608	612,329	55	205,732		High
ALA	Membership	n/a	650	members	228,441	242,789	222	144,585		High
NOMA	Membership	n/a	3,600	members	2,466,965	1,986,948	398	550,963	5	High
NCARB	Record holders	116,005	126,841	record holders	40,947,703	42,912,338	305	38,689,100	6	High
State Licensing Boards	By license	116,005	266,643	base+reciprocal licenses	21,832,663	21,832,663	81	24,387,117	7	Medium
Totals					**194,046,865**	**194,487,095**		**120,376,479**	**62%**	

Notes

0 Data compiled from organizational membership records, 990 tax filings, and other public material.
1 Average dues paid across 230 ACSA-associates schools.
2 Average of fees paid by all schools to NAAB.
3 Based on average AIA membership dues across categories.
4 Compiled from available 990, dues, and membership data.
5 Based on average ALAL members dues across categories.
6 Based on average NOMA membership dues across categories.
7 Total fees collected based on NCARB census data and costs for 2024.

Figure 2 *– Summary of participants, revenue, and expense of the system of architectural organizations. For a summary of explanatory notes, see Figure 1.*[21]

Category	Organization	Annual Revenue	Annual Expense	Revenue Distribution	Expense Distribution
Education	***ACSA***	$ 2,497,844	$ 2,580,468	1.3%	1.3%
	NAAB	$ 1,470,191	$ 2,154,044	0.8%	1.1%
	Subtotal	**$ 3,968,035**	**$ 4,734,512**	**2.0%**	**2.4%**
	AIA National	$ 70,085,469	$ 68,575,808	36.1%	35.3%
	AIA - Components	53,728,981	$ 53,589,708	27.7%	27.6%
	AIAS	$ 788,608	$ 612,329	0.4%	0.3%
	ALA	$ 228,441	$ 242,789	0.1%	0.1%
	NOMA	$ 2,466,965	$ 1,986,948	1.3%	1.0%
	Subtotal	**$ 127,298,464**	**$ 125,007,582**	**65.6%**	**64.3%**
Licensing	***NCARB***	$ 40,947,703	$ 42,912,338	21.1%	22.1%
	State Lic Boards	$ 21,832,663	$ 21,832,663	11.3%	11.2%
	Subtotal	**$ 62,780,366**	**$ 64,745,001**	**32.4%**	**33.3%**
TOTALS		**$ 194,046,865**	**$ 194,487,095**	**100.0%**	**100.0%**

Figure 3 *– Distribution of organizational costs by category.*

			Career Stage					
Category	**Cost Item**	**Annual Cost ($/yr)**	**Education**	**Pre-Professional**	**Licensed Practitio**	**Total**	**% of Career Costs**	**Note**
		Age	18–24	25–30	31–70			
		Years in stage	7	6	41	**54**		1
Education	***AIAS or NOMAS***	$55	$385			**$385**	1%	2
Profession	***AIA***	$593		$780	$24,313	$25,093	39%	3
	Other orgs	$398			$16,318	$16,318	25%	4
	Subtotal		**$0**	**$780**	**$40,631**	**$41,411**	**64%**	
License	***NCARB***	varies		$3,138	$11,685	$14,823	23%	5
	Continuing Ed	$100			$4,100	$4,100	6%	6
	Licensure	$91			$3,731	$3,731	6%	7
	Subtotal		$0	$3,138	$19,516	$22,654	35%	
TOTAL CAREER COST			**$385**	**$3,918**	**$60,147**	**$64,450**	**100%**	
	Average cost per year of stage		**$55**	**$653**	**$1,467**	**$1,194**		

Figure 4 *– Projected cost of membership and participation in the organizational system to a single architect, during her career.*

Constituents	**Approximate Cohort Size**	**NCARB**						**AIA/Students and AIA**		
		Active Records			***Certificate Holders***					
		Participants	*Non-Participants*	*Participation Rate*	*Participants*	*Non-Participants*	*Participation Rate*	*Participants*	*Non - Participants*	*Participation Rate*
Students	33,000	16,170	16,830	49%	N/A			6,000	27,000	18%
Emerging professionals on licensure path in firms	27,000	27,000	-	100%	N/A			21,200	5,800	79%
Non-licensed architectural staff in firms (Note 1)	35,000	N/A			N/A			2,000	33,000	6%
All licensed architects	116,005	87,300	28,705	75%	51,000	65,005	44%	64,700	51,305	56%
Actively practicing architects	105,000	86,000	19,000	82%	48,500	56,500	46%	48,500	56,500	46%

Notes

1 Excluding 4,100 students working in offices and included above

Figure 5 *– Constituents of NCARB and the AIA, and participation rates in each. For a detailed explanation of the methods used to compute these numbers, see Figure 2.*

Endnotes

[1] AUTHOR'S NOTE: Demographic data about the American architecture profession is incomplete at best, and inconsistent at worst. In this paper we have attempted to reconcile information from various sources, including the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the American Institute of Architects, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, and the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture. As such, these computations are intended to show trends, rather than precise numbers. All organizational data, revenue figures, membership dues, accreditation fees, membership counts, chapter counts, and institutional participation estimates presented in this study were derived from such official sources, including IRS Form 990 filings, annual reports, membership schedules, accreditation fee schedules, organizational directories, and information published directly by the respective organizations. Where official membership counts were not publicly reported, estimates were calculated using reported revenue and published fee structures.

Much of the data derived for this work involved integrating and balancing these sources to arrive at probable averages. The profession would greatly benefit from a comprehensive demographic study of its participants, from students entering the pipeline through retired architects, to fully understand who comprises the American architectural population, where they work, what they are doing, and how they engage, if at all, in the system of organizations.

[2] Guide to organizational abbreviations used in this paper:

AIA – American Institute of Architects (including National and local organizations)
ACSA – Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture
AIAS – American Institute of Architectural Students
NAAB – National Architectural Accrediting Board
NOMA – National Organization of Minority Architects
ALA – Association of Licensed Architects
NCARB – National Council of Architectural Registration Boards

[3] NCARB by the Numbers 2025 at https://www.ncarb.org/nbtn2025/state-of-licensure.

[4] By comparison, Italy, a country of 59 million, has 152,000 architects.

[5] See http://aamc.org/data-reports/data/2025-key-findings accessed 24 May 2026.

[6] See https://www.americanbar.org/news/profile-legal-profession/demographics/ accessed 24 March 2026.

[7] Numerous other organizations, like the Architectural League or Van Alen Institute in New York, or the Forum for Architecture and Urban Design in Los Angeles are not subjects of this investigation, as they do not directly support the career trajectory of an architect in the same way that AIA, NCARB, or NAAB do.

[8] See https://www.acsa-arch.org/about/ accessed 25 May 2026.

[9] See https://www.naab.org/who-we-are/about-naab accessed 25 May 2026.

[10] See https://www.aia.org/about-aia/aia-strategic-plan accessed 25 May 2026.

[11] See https://www.aias.org/about/about/ accessed 25 May 2026.

[12] The example cited is the local AIA Chapter covering New Haven, CT and the entire state; see https://aiact.org/about/2025-2027-strategic-plan/ accessed 25 May 2026.

[13] See https://www.alatoday.org/about-us accessed 25 May 2026.

[14] See https://www.noma.net/about-noma/ accessed 25 May 2026.

[15] See https://www.ncarb.org/about/ncarbs-role accessed 25 May 2026.

[16] See https://www.cab.ca.gov/about/miss_vis_val.shtml accessed 25 May 2026.

[17] This total includes: 33,000 students, 7,000 faculty, 174,500 billable individuals in offices, plus another 11,000 licensed architects currently not practicing but in other roles. This analysis, performed by Claude AI, combines data from the BLS with NCARB and AIA membership information.

[18] This calculation is based on 2024 compensation data from the AIA Compensation and Benefits Report 2025 at https://www.aia.org/about-aia/press/aia-compensation-benefits-report-2025-now-available accessed 8 July 2026. The $131,000 number was derived by taking typical employee salaries from the report and projecting beginning as a "Non-licensed Architectural Associate" ($65,620 per year) and completing a career as a "Managing Principal" at $214,430 per year.

[19] See "Architecture Program Leaders Face Existential Accreditation Crisis" at https://www.architecturalrecord.com/articles/17172-architecture-program-leaders-face-existential-accreditation-crisis accessed 16 July 2026.

[20] See "NCARB by the Numbers 2026" at https://www.ncarb.org/publications/2026-ncarb-the-numbers-pdf and "NCARB Competency Standard" at https://www.ncarb.org/become-architect/pathways-to-practice/competency-standard accessed August 2026.

[21] All organizational data, revenue figures, membership dues, accreditation fees, membership counts, chapter counts, and institutional participation estimates presented in this study were derived from official sources, including IRS Form 990 filings, annual reports, membership schedules, accreditation fee schedules, organizational directories, and information published directly by the respective organizations. Where official membership counts were not publicly reported, estimates were calculated using reported revenue and published fee structures. AIAS student population figures were obtained from information published on the official AIAS website.