

ATTITUDES TOWARD PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS AND ACCREDITATIONS AMONG DESIGN STUDENTS

Carmen D. Steggell, Carol C. Caughey, and Steven R. Mansfield

Abstract

Universities expend significant resources to obtain and maintain accreditations and professional affiliations. The purpose of this study was to investigate design students' attitudes regarding professional organizations. Students majoring in housing, interior design, and/or interior merchandising/marketing at two state universities responded to a two-part questionnaire. Results revealed that only a minority of students were able to correctly identify relevant acronyms and few considered professional accreditations in their selection of universities. However, senior students stated that they were likely to join professional organizations in their careers. Findings are important in considering the resources expended in accreditations and in student opportunities to connect to professional organizations and attain credentials.

Introduction

Colleges and universities place great importance on accreditation and professional affiliations. There are many professional organizations related to the residential design and interior design professions. Some of these organizations offer professional connections and credentials to individuals while others offer curriculum endorsement and/or accreditation. The resources expended by universities to qualify for and retain accreditations and endorsements are substantial both in terms of money and faculty time. However, it is not known whether students place importance on such endorsements and accreditations nor if they believe that individual professional affiliations and certifications are valuable in their careers. This research investigated attitudes of housing, design, and merchandising students regarding these professional organizations. Specifically, the objectives were: (a) to discover the level of awareness of design students regarding professional organizations and certifications; (b) to compare

Carmen D. Steggell and Carol C. Caughey are Associate Professors, Department of Design and Human Environment, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR; and Steven R. Mansfield is Assistant Professor, Interior Design Program, Utah State University, Logan, UT.

the level of awareness between incoming students and those about to graduate from a design program; (c) to consider the role of endorsements/accreditations in students' choice of schools; and (d) to examine students' intentions to pursue professional memberships and certifications in their careers.

Review of Literature

Increased emphasis on accreditations and endorsements for undergraduate and graduate professional programs in universities may be due to external influences from industry and business, and perhaps from the pressure upon universities to market themselves. Accreditations and endorsements may influence the selection of a college by students and their parents (Dinham, 1989). Professions as diverse as nursing, architecture, and industrial technology offer certifications and often accredit undergraduate and graduate academic programs (Johnson, 1994). Three endorsements and accreditations are common among housing studies and interior design programs in the U.S.:

- accreditation by American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS),
- endorsement by National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA), and
- accreditation by Foundation for Interior Design Education Research (FIDER).

One hundred thirty eight academic units are accredited by AAFCS. Accreditation is granted to family and consumer sciences units within colleges and universities that meet or exceed standards established by AAFCS's Council for Accreditation. AAFCS is recognized as a Specialized Accrediting Agency by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. AAFCS's program meets national criteria for organizations carrying out such a program. The model requires application by a family and consumer sciences unit holding membership in AAFCS's Higher Education Unit, a careful self-study by the unit, an on-site visit by an evaluation team and an institutional response to the team's report, and a subsequent review and decision by AAFCS's Council for Accreditation. The Council applies contemporary criteria that are national in scope. Thus, accreditation contributes to the assurance that graduates of these programs have had formal preparation that meets nationally accepted standards of quality (American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, 2005).

NKBA offers endorsement for interior design and housing programs that meet certain curriculum criteria as well as certifications for design professionals in the kitchen and bath industry. NKBA's Endorsed College Program was created to serve the professional needs of the industry and ensure consistent, quality education for students who desire to become kitchen/bathroom design professionals. A college applying for NKBA endorsement must demonstrate that it meets NKBA's educational requirements. These requirements represent the basis of a program that the NKBA considers essential for quality education. Each student must complete classroom work and supervised internships, which will enhance and extend the

classroom experiences and ensure that they have fulfilled the minimum student competencies. Currently, there are over 30 NKBA Endorsed College Programs in North America (National Kitchen and Bath Association, 2005b).

NKBA also offers certifications for kitchen and bath designers, including the Associate Kitchen and Bath Designer (AKBD) at the entry level, the Certified Kitchen Designer (CKD) and Certified Bathroom Designer (CBD) at the professional level, and, at the highest level, the Certified Master Kitchen and Bathroom Designer (CMKBD) (National Kitchen and Bath Association, 2005a). Each of these credentials represents professional training, experience, and an exam. No empirical studies were located that examined the perceptions of students regarding NKBA endorsement or certifications.

Many interior design programs are accredited by FIDER. FIDER sets standards for postsecondary interior design education, evaluates college and university interior design programs, and publishes a list of accredited programs that meet the standards. As of July 2005 there were 145 FIDER accredited professional programs (Foundation for Interior Design Education Research, 2005).

Studies have examined professional designers' perceptions of FIDER accredited programs and their assessment of whether graduating from a FIDER program was helpful. For example, Madigan (1998) reported that among professional designers responding to a survey, only 27% believed that graduating from a FIDER accredited program "helped them very much." Birdsong and Lawlor (2001) studied interior design practitioners' perceptions of accreditation of undergraduate programs, state licensing, professional examination (National Council for Interior Design Qualification/NCIDQ), and graduate education and found that graduate education was not perceived as important as the other three issues.

Bootman (1992) examined state requirements for individual licensing and qualification through the NCIDQ exam and identified conflicts and potential conflicts between the fields of interior design and architecture. More recently, Guerin and Thompson (2004) defended the necessity of graduate level education for professional interior designers and proposed a Master's of Interior Design program. Students' expectations for the interior design profession were examined by Lee and Hagerty (1996) who compared them with those expectations of interior design practitioners. They found that upper-division students had more realistic expectations than did lower-division students. Practitioners differed from all students in expectations of working conditions, general work type, and business management.

Research concerning accreditation in other fields has also been conducted. Following the National Association of Industrial Technology's mandate to assess student learning in accredited baccalaureate programs, Johnson (1994) studied program administrators' understanding of assessment techniques and methodologies. Work on accrediting programs in applied developmental

psychology (Fisher & Koocher, 1990) has centered on individual accrediting of psychologists and its relation to statutory accreditation.

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of design students regarding professional affiliations and accreditations. Respondents consisted of 169 students at two state universities, one in the Western U.S. and the other in the Pacific Northwest, who were majoring in interior design, housing studies, or interior merchandising/marketing. The students were divided into two groups: (a) students in their first quarter/semester of the program and (b) students completing their final year of study. One of the universities is FIDER accredited (210 enrolled students) while the other is NKBA endorsed (232 enrolled students).

Respondents were enrolled in either a freshman level design course or a senior level design course. The study utilized a two-part questionnaire which was administered during class. Part I consisted of a list of 18 acronyms representing professional organizations, professional certifications, and endorsements/accreditations of education programs related to interior design and residential design. Respondents wrote out the full name for acronyms with which they were familiar. They were encouraged to guess if they were not sure of the name. Data from Part I were coded by two of the researchers. The names written by the students were coded as "correct," "nearly correct," "incorrect," or "no response." Intercoder reliability was measured at 97%.

Part II included forced choice questions concerning current membership in specific professional organizations, planned future membership in specific professional organizations, future plans for professional certifications, and the importance of endorsements/accreditations of the educational program in selecting the university where they studied. Additional questions identified respondents' major, gender, age, grade point average, and class standing. Class standing for this study was defined as a dichotomous category: entry level students or senior level students (rather than by earned number of credit hours). Students recorded their responses on Scantron forms which were read electronically and entered directly into the database. Data were examined using frequencies, chi-square analysis, and regression analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Description of Respondents

Based on the 169 completed questionnaires (99% response rate), the majority of respondents (79%) were at the beginning of their program of study, while 21% were in their final year. About 60% ($n = 102$) were students in an NKBA endorsed program at a Northwestern state university; of those 82 were freshmen and 20 were seniors. About 40% of the sample ($n = 67$) were students in a FIDER

accredited program at a Western state university; of those 51 were freshmen and 16 were seniors. Students' major courses of study were as follows: 59% interior design, 12% housing studies, 5% double majors (interior design/housing), 2% interior merchandising/marketing, and 14% "other" (does not total 100% due to non-response). Eighty-three percent were female, and 81% were between 18 and 24 years of age. Data were collected in October, 2004.

Level of Awareness of Design Students Regarding Professional Organizations and Certifications

Students in design programs are typically introduced to various professional associations and credentialing opportunities and may be expected to recognize the acronyms that are generally used to refer to them. This study examined students' familiarity with 18 acronyms associated with residential design or interior design. Table 1 shows the number and percentage of participants who correctly, or nearly correctly, identified each acronym. The top three identifiable associations were: American Society of Interior Designers (ASID, 69%), National Kitchen and Bath Association (NKBA, 44%), and International Interior Design Association (IIDA, 40%). Less than one-third of the respondents identified the National Association of Home Builders (NAHB, 29%) and the American Institute of Building Design (AIBD, 28%). Surprisingly, FIDER was known by only 16% of the respondents.

Because respondents were enrolled in either a FIDER accredited program or in an NKBA endorsed program, results were also compared between the two schools. As may be expected, the identification rate for FIDER was greater by students in the FIDER accredited program: 21% as compared to 13% for the non-FIDER accredited program. Students in the NKBA endorsed program showed a much higher identification rate of NKBA: 51% as compared to 34% in the non-NKBA endorsed program. Interestingly, the NKBA recognition rate was higher than the FIDER recognition rate in both programs.

Compared to the professional associations, numbers were lower for identification of credentials available to design professionals. Overall, the highest rate of recognition was for CKD (30%) and CBD (25%), followed by NCIDQ (22%). When compared by school, NKBA's CBD certification was identified more frequently by respondents in the NKBA endorsed program: 30% in the NKBA endorsed school correctly identified CBD as compared to 18% at the non-NKBA endorsed program. The identification rate of CKD was somewhat more similar: 31% and 27%, respectively.

In considering what factors may predict whether students are more likely to recognize an acronym, regression analyses were conducted using various demographic variables. This analysis did not provide a statistically significant ($p = .05$) predictive model.

Table 1. Correct Identification of Acronyms of Professional Organizations and Certifications by Respondents

Acronym	FIDER		NKBA		Total	
	Accredited		Endorsed			
	<i>n</i> ^a	%	<i>n</i> ^b	%	<i>n</i> ^c	%
AIA American Institute of Architects	15	22%	21	21%	36	21%
AIBD American Institute of Building Design	24	36%	23	23%	47	28%
ASID American Society of Interior Designers	57	85%	60	59%	117	69%
CAPS Certified Aging in Place Specialist	4	6%	5	5%	9	5%
CBD Certified Bathroom Designer	12	18%	31	30%	43	25%
CKD Certified Kitchen Designer	18	27%	32	31%	50	30%
CPBD Certified Professional Building Designer	9	13%	4	4%	13	8%
FIDER Foundation for Interior Design Education Research	14	21%	13	13%	27	16%
IALD International Association of Lighting Designers	0	0	3	3%	3	2%
IESNA Illuminating Engineering Society of North America	13	19%	7	7%	20	12%
IFDA International Furnishings Design Association	2	3%	3	3%	5	3%
IIDA International Interior Design Association	42	63%	25	25%	67	40%
NAHB National Association of Home Builders	19	28%	30	29%	49	29%
NARI National Association of the Remodeling Industry	0	0	0	0	0	0
NCBCD National Council of Building Designer Certification	0	0	6	6%	6	4%
NCIDQ National Council for Interior Design Qualification	21	31%	16	16%	37	22%
NHFA National Home Furnishings Association	0	0	0	0	0	0
NKBA National Kitchen and Bath Association	23	34%	52	51%	75	44%

n^a = 67, *n*^b = 102, *n*^c = 169

Differences in the Level of Awareness between Incoming Students and Students about to Graduate from a Design Program

It may be expected that senior housing and design students will be more familiar with professional organizations and their acronyms than beginning students. Chi-square analyses were used to test this expectation for the three organizations that emerged as the most identifiable among this sample (ASID, IIDA, and NKBA). Respondents' recognition of the acronyms were dichotomized as (1) correct/nearly correct or (0) incorrect/no response and examined by class standing. Although seniors in the sample were slightly more likely than freshmen to recognize the ASID and IIDA acronyms, chi-square analyses were not statistically significant for either. Conversely, freshmen were slightly more likely to recognize the NKBA acronym, but again the chi-square analysis was not statistically significant.

The same technique was used to examine differences between seniors and freshmen in their identification of acronyms for the three most recognized credentials: CBD, CKD, and NCIDQ. Seniors were significantly more likely ($p = .000$) to recognize these acronyms than freshmen (Table 2).

Table 2. Recognition of Credential Acronyms by Class Standing

	χ^2	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
CBD	56.98	1	.000
CKD	54.42	1	.000
NCIDQ	55.49	1	.000

Role of Endorsements and Accreditations in Choice of School

Three endorsements and accreditations are common among housing studies and interior design programs in the U.S.: accreditation by FIDER, endorsement by NKBA, and accreditation by AAFCS. Respondents were asked how important these endorsements and accreditations were to them in selecting the university where they would study. Possible answers ranged from 1 to 4, with 1 indicating "no importance" and 4 indicating "extremely important." For each of the three, 75% or more of the students indicated that the accreditations/endorsements had *little* or *no importance* in their selection of a school. Mean scores indicated that FIDER accreditation was more likely to be important ($M = 1.81$), while NKBA endorsement ($M = 1.24$) and AAFCS accreditation ($M = 1.22$) were less so (Table 3).

Table 3. Importance of Accreditations and Endorsements in School Selection

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
AAFCS Accreditation	1.22	1.03
FIDER Accreditation	1.81	1.17
NKBA Endorsement	1.24	1.11

Examination of factors that may predict the importance of endorsements or accreditations by students in selecting their university was done through regression analyses. Neither school nor class standing were statistically significant predictors. However, grade point average yielded a statistically significant model ($p = .000$) for each of the three (AAFCS, FIDER, and NKBA) but with somewhat weak predictive power ($R^2 < .3$) (Table 4).

Table 4. Grade Point Average as a Predictor for the Importance of Accreditations and Endorsements

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
AAFCS Accreditation ^a	.565	.082	.473
FIDER Accreditation ^b	.565	.094	.423
NKBA Endorsement ^c	.643	.082	.521

a. $r = .473$, $R^2 = .223$, $p = .000$

b. $r = .423$, $R^2 = .179$, $p = .000$

c. $r = .521$, $R^2 = .271$, $p = .000$

Students' Intentions to Pursue Professional Memberships and Certifications in Their Careers

Respondents were given basic information about the purpose of four professional organizations specific to residential design and interior design careers and asked, as they considered their future careers, whether they planned to become members. The four organizations were AIBD, ASID, IIDA, and NKBA. Nearly three-quarters (73%) planned to “definitely or probably” join ASID and nearly two-thirds (64%) planned to “definitely or probably” join IIDA. Forty-five percent of respondents planned to join NKBA while 42% planned to join AIBD. A minority of respondents reported little or no interest in joining any of the four organizations (Table 5).

Table 5. Future Plans to Join Professional Organizations

	Beginning Students		Senior Students		Total	
	<i>n</i> ^a	%	<i>n</i> ^b	%	<i>n</i> ^c	%
AIBD	61	46%	10	28%	71	42%
ASID	92	69%	32	89%	124	73%
IIDA	79	59%	29	81%	108	64%
NKBA	53	40%	23	64%	76	45%

$n^a = 133$, $n^b = 36$, $n^c = 169$

It may be that senior students have a better understanding of the benefits of professional organizations than do beginning students. Therefore, results were tabulated separately for beginning students and senior students. As shown in Table 5, seniors were much more likely to plan to join ASID (89%), IIDA (81%), and NKBA (64%), but less likely for AIBD (28%).

Examination of factors predicting senior students' intentions to join professional organizations was conducted using regression analysis. Based on indications that senior students would join these organizations, ASID, IIDA, NKBA, and AIBD were examined. Predictor variables included school, grade point average, and major. As shown in Table 6, plans to join ASID, IIDA, NKBA, and AIBD were correlated with higher grade point average, majoring in interior design, and enrollment in the NKBA endorsed program. Statistically significant models ($p = .000$) were found for ASID, IIDA, and NKBA. However, none of the resulting models produced strong predictors, with $R^2 = .040$ for ASID membership, $R^2 = .120$ for IIDA membership, and $R^2 = .157$ for NKBA membership. The regression model predicting intention to join AIBD was neither strong ($R^2 = .045$) nor statistically significant ($p = .068$).

Table 6. Predictors of Senior Students' Plans to Join Professional Organizations

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
ASID^a	2.542	.647	
GPA	.065	.160	.089
Major	.039	.110	.080
Program	-.211	.283	-.140
IIDA^b	3.019	.566	
GPA	.064	.140	.097
Major	-.099	.096	-.221
Program	-.328	.247	-.238
NKBA^c	1.039	.696	
GPA	.047	.172	.057
Major	.014	.118	.025
Program	.673	.304	.388
AIBD^d	2.118	.529	
GPA	.095	.131	.475
Major	-.032	.090	.723
Program	.166	.134	.476

a. $r = .199$, $R^2 = .040$, $p = .000$

b. $r = .347$, $R^2 = .120$, $p = .000$

c. $r = .396$, $R^2 = .157$, $p = .000$

d. $r = .213$, $R^2 = .045$, $p = .068$

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to investigate awareness and attitudes of housing and design students regarding professional organizations. It was found that the level of awareness of professional organizations was limited. Of the 18 acronyms presented, the majority of students were able to correctly or almost correctly identify only one: ASID. Three additional professional organizations and three certification acronyms were identified by more than 20% while the remaining nine were identified by 16% or fewer of the respondents. Identification of FIDER and NKBA was higher in the program accredited or endorsed by the organization, although the NKBA acronym was higher than FIDER in both programs. When class standing was considered, senior students were more likely to identify the CBD, CKD, and NCIDQ credentials. However, there was no significant difference between senior students and beginning students in the identification of other acronyms.

Endorsements and accreditations are sought by universities to provide evidence that curriculum is meeting industry standards. However, NKBA endorsement, FIDER accreditation, and AAFCS accreditation were of little or no importance to the vast majority of respondents in their selection of a school. However, students with a higher grade point average were more likely to report importance for these accreditations/endorsements. When asked about their plans to join professional organizations, the majority planned to join ASID and/or IIDA, while slightly less than half planned to join NKBA and/or AIBD. Seniors were much more likely to plan to join ASID, IIDA, or NKBA. Other factors that may predict plans to join professional organizations were enrollment in an NKBA endorsed program, an interior design major, and a high grade point average.

Implications and Recommendations

Colleges and universities expend significant resources to obtain and maintain professional endorsements and accreditations. In addition, individual faculty members provide housing and interior design majors with information and opportunities to connect with professional associations and to prepare for credentialing examinations. It is important to understand the knowledge and attitudes of students regarding these efforts. This study was exploratory, and limited in that respondents represented only two universities. Nevertheless, if further evidence suggests that students do not value these efforts, there exist two options. If they are not valued, we may need to reconsider the resources we expend in these efforts. On the other hand, if we believe that these connections and opportunities are important, we must communicate and demonstrate them more clearly to our students.

Further research should be conducted. A deeper investigation into students' perceptions and understanding of the role of professional organizations is needed.

It would be interesting to add the Housing Education and Research Association (HERA) to the listing of professional organizations. Are design and housing students aware of HERA and, if so, what are their perceptions of HERA?

A larger sample would provide results that may be generalized more extensively. The attitudes of faculty members and practitioners are also important to investigate. In particular, the influence of faculty and the promotion of professional organizations within the classroom must be considered in understanding students' attitudes toward professional affiliations, endorsements, and accreditations. Finally, we must quantify the costs of providing these opportunities and weigh those costs against real and perceived benefits to faculty, students, and the professions we serve.

References

- American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences. (2005). *Accreditation*. Retrieved October, 2005, from www.aafcs.org/education/accreditation.html
- Birdsong, C., & Lawlor, P. (2001). Perceptions of professionalism: Interior design practitioners working for the top 100 firms. *Journal of Interior Design*, 27(1), 20-34.
- Bootman, S. (1992). The licensing and certification of interior designers in the United States. *MAI*, 31(01).
- Dinham, S. (1989). *Assessment, accreditation, and licensure and their effects upon teaching and learning*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Evaluation Association, Tucson, AZ.
- Fischer, C., & Koocher, G. (1990). To be or not to be? Accreditation, credentialing, and applied developmental psychology. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 11(4), 381-394.
- Foundation for Interior Design Education Research. (2005). *FIDER home page*. Retrieved October, 2005, from www.fider.org
- Guerin, D., & Thompson, J. (2004). Interior design education in the 21st century: An educational transformation. *Journal of Interior Design*, 30(1), 1-12.
- Johnson, R. (1994). Assessment requirements, practices, and rationale in NAIT-accreditation baccalaureate degree programs. *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 56(03A).
- Lee, K., & Hagerty, W. (1996). Comparison of occupation expectations between interior design students and practitioners. *Journal of Interior Design*, 22(1), 1-14.
- Madigan, M. (1998, March). Educating designers: Who calls the shots? *Interiors*, 157(3), 8.

National Kitchen and Bath Association. (2005a). *Design certification levels*. Retrieved October, 2005, from www.nkba.org/xeducation/content.asp?ID=34

National Kitchen and Bath Association. (2005b). *NKBA endorsed programs*. Retrieved October, 2005, from www.nkba.org/xeducation/content.asp?ID=81