Unsurprisingly, considering press and trade reports on labor markets, a robust construction industry and pent-up demand by architecture firms, recent months have provided graduates and continuing students rich and varied opportunities for earning professional experience.

IPAL at USC: The USC School of Architecture is one of a select group of U.S. institutions to offer qualified students an opportunity to participate in an NCARB initiative named the Integrated Path to Architectural Licensure, known as IPAL. USC’s IPAL is the largest such program.

In short, the IPAL initiative offers motivated students an opportunity to both earn and record experience hours (through the Architectural Experience Program (AXP)) and to take all the divisions of the Architectural Registration Exam (ARE) while enrolled in either of the two professional degree programs available at USC, the Bachelor of Architecture and the Master of Architecture degree programs.

Earning and recording hours through NCARB’s AXP is an option for all students enrolled in the School working towards an architecture degree. However, only those students who qualify and are enrolled in the USC IPAL initiative are able to take the ARE. If not participating in IPAL, students must wait until earning a professional degree to take any portion of the ARE.

The goal of the IPAL Initiative at USC: USC IPAL enables participating students to graduate with, or close to acquiring, a license to practice architecture in one of the 54 states and territories subject to the jurisdiction of NCARB. Securing a license holds significant advantages, both in terms of professional development and status and in that it positively affects earnings. A license enables the licensee to use the title “architect,” to own an entity offering architectural services, and to practice architecture.

Taking advantage of the USC IPAL Initiative can substantially reduce the time between the end of formal studies and the acquisition of a license to practice architecture. Consider the following facts: Average time to pass all divisions of the ARE, measured from first attempt through ARE completion is 3.4 years. Most candidates begin taking the ARE an average of three years after graduating. IPAL at USC seeks to minimize this time and eliminate this waiting period. IPAL students’ “exam muscles” will never be stronger than they are while enrolled in USC’s professional degree programs.

Trends and Data: Over the past 12 months, USC students participating in the USC IPAL Initiative have earned a total of 40,662 hours while working for 53 different firms. Additionally, over the same time period, IPAL students have passed 24 divisions of the ARE.

The current trend is for degree holders to delay taking the ARE for several years after graduation. Nationally, the average age at which candidates begin taking the ARE is 29.1 years old, with the average age of candidates completing the ARE being 32.5 years old. As stated above, the average time from the start of taking the exam until completion is 3.4 years. By beginning the ARE process while enrolled in school, USC IPAL students can substantially reduce the time required to complete the ARE.

In 2021, 3,418 candidates completed the ARE nationally, an increase of 26% over 2020. More candidates earning their license will exert pressure on unlicensed graduates to secure licensure in order to compete for positions and earn at a level commensurate with qualifications and experience.

Participating in IPAL at USC improves graduates’ competitive position in the marketplace.
Advantages of Participation in IPAL: Participation is entirely voluntary. It offers the opportunity to take all six divisions of the ARE, at whatever pace, at whatever schedule, in whatever order the candidate chooses. Another advantage is delaying the selection of a jurisdiction (State or Territory) in which the candidate intends to obtain an initial license. Usually made prior to taking the first exam division of the ARE, IPAL allows the candidate to delay this decision until after graduation, at which point the IPAL student might have a better sense of immediate professional goals and objectives.

IPAL at USC SoA: Directions and Resources: For current information, refer to the USC SoA IPAL website (arc.usc.edu/integrated-path-to-licensure-initiative). This information is updated periodically. This is the primary resource for USC IPAL. Carefully read the web page and information available via the links. Understanding this information is critical to successfully and efficiently participating in the IPAL Initiative.

IPAL at USC SoA is designed to enable motivated students to begin early their path towards licensure. It is available to all qualified students, completely voluntary, and intended for a select few students. The IPAL Initiative it is a demanding and rigorous program and to complete successfully requires dedication and determination.

The IPAL enrollment process is discretionary. Students can join at any time while in either of the two USC professional degree programs. There is no additional cost associated with participation in the USC SoA IPAL initiative. However, all participants must have an active NCARB Record to enroll in IPAL. There is a cost associated with establishing and maintaining an NCARB Record. Useful information on establishing an NCARB File/Record is available at www.ncarb.org IPAL Advisors will be available to answer questions during IPAL information sessions scheduled for this fall.

Making sense OF AXP, ARE, NCARB AND IPAL
NCARB, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards, records candidates' experience hours earned and reported as part of AXP, creates and administers the ARE exam and records candidate progress in terms of the results of taking the various division of the ARE. There are fees associated with taking each division of the ARE. However, the USC SoA IPAL initiative does not require any fees and is available to all full-time USC students enrolled in the B Arch or M Arch professional degree programs.

A Unique and Valuable Resource
While independent of the USC IPAL Initiative, the "Not Licensed Yet" (NotLY) exam prep program, founded and made possible by Professors Douglas Noble and Karen Kensek, is available to all ARE candidates. USC IPAL students have access to this valuable resource. There is no charge to participate.

Signing up to participate in IPAL at USC SoA: To register to participate in the USC SoA IPAL Initiative follow the steps and instructions as outlined on the SoA IPAL website:

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