



NCARB Firm Guide

Best Practices in Licensure Support

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Introduction

For many individuals working to become architects, firm culture is inseparable from licensure progress. Licensure candidates work with their employer to earn and document professional experience through the [Architectural Experience Program](#)® (AXP®). Throughout this process, candidates rely on their firms in order to meet several of the program's requirements, including:

- **Lawful practice**—the firm must be lawfully practicing architecture per the jurisdiction's requirements
- **Licensed supervisor**—an architect licensed in the U.S. or Canada must supervise at least half of the candidate's AXP experience
- **Variety of work opportunities**—the candidate must gain experience and build competency in tasks across all phases of architectural practice

If their firm doesn't meet the lawful practice requirement, can't provide an eligible supervisor, or doesn't ensure access to each of the AXP's six experience areas, candidates will face difficulties completing the experience program. In some cases, these candidates may need to find a new employer to progress along the path to licensure.

Similar to other professions that require a training or experience component, the architecture profession has a longstanding tradition of mentorship. Mentorship is critical to maintain the profession's ongoing health and to develop new practitioners. As a firm, you are responsible for providing your employees with professional development opportunities—including access to the necessary AXP opportunities.

Dedicating resources to the support and training of the next generation of architects can also benefit the firm itself by creating more effective employees, increasing employee retention, and reducing employment costs.

For best results, firm support for licensure candidates should extend beyond the minimum AXP requirements to the full path to licensure—including support for candidates taking the [Architect Registration Examination](#)® (ARE®). Employers should also take care to ensure equitable access to firm resources and licensure support for all candidates, regardless of demographic or background.

This guide includes best practices and recommended policies for firms interested in establishing an equitable culture of licensure support, including sample language that can be adopted for use in an employee handbook. For questions, please reach out to communications@ncarb.org.

Best Practices in Licensure Support

Firms should provide a variety of support opportunities for candidates on the path to licensure, including financial support for licensure costs and access to ARE study materials, a structured approach to completing the AXP, and interpersonal support and guidance. In addition, it's essential that firms stay familiar with current licensure paths, ensuring that those in mentorship positions can effectively guide candidates toward their career goals.

AWARENESS OF LICENSURE PATHS

Many architects lose sight of current licensure requirements and processes once they've earned their initial license. But for those in the position of guiding emerging professionals, maintaining familiarity with current licensure paths is essential to prevent the spread of inaccurate or outdated information.

Education

- Currently, most jurisdictions require a degree from a NAAB-accredited program for initial licensure <https://www.ncarb.org/earn-a-degree/study-architecture>
- However, 17 of the 55 U.S. jurisdictions offer additional pathways to licensure
- In these jurisdictions, candidates with other educational backgrounds can combine additional years of experience with other degrees (or no degree) in lieu of graduating from an accredited program
- Additionally, 48 jurisdictions allow these additional experience pathways for reciprocal licensure, offering candidates robust career options regardless of educational background

Experience

- Most jurisdictions require that candidates complete the AXP for initial licensure
- Some jurisdictions also require additional experience beyond the AXP
- Most candidates complete the AXP through the [hourly reporting method](#)—as part of this method, candidates must submit experience reports within eight months for full AXP credit and within five years for partial credit
- However, NCARB also offers an [AXP Portfolio](#) option for experienced candidates with significant work history that is older than five years

Examination

- All candidates must complete the ARE for initial licensure
- NCARB offers free practice exams for all candidates with an active NCARB Record
- In addition, NCARB offers accommodations for candidates with disabilities (including pregnancy and nursing) and for candidates who speak or read English as a second language

- NCARB retired the exam's five-year rolling clock on passed ARE divisions in 2023 and reinstated previously expired ARE 4.0 divisions for candidates whose jurisdiction doesn't have its own rolling clock requirement

Certification

- The NCARB Certificate facilitates reciprocal licensure in the U.S. and abroad and provides free continuing education courses, among other benefits
- NCARB offers multiple pathways to certification, including:
 - A pathway for individuals with a degree from a NAAB-accredited program
 - [Two Education Alternative pathways](#), dependent on educational background, for individuals without a degree from a NAAB-accredited program
 - A [Foreign Architect Path](#) for individuals licensed outside of the United States or Canada

FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR LICENSURE

There are several levels of financial support to consider based on your firm's budgetary and funding capabilities. Covering the cost of licensure as a professional development benefit can help improve employee retention and performance. NCARB recommends offering financial support in the following areas:

NCARB Record

- Cost: \$100 fee to establish, \$85 fee for each annual renewal
- Funding recommendation: Full
- Purpose: Candidates will use their NCARB Record to document their professional experience, take the ARE, and apply for licensure. Candidates also gain access to NCARB's free practice exams via their NCARB Record and free CE courses for professional development.

Jurisdiction Fees

- Cost: Varies—each jurisdiction sets its own fees
- Funding recommendation: Full
- Purpose: Candidates must pay jurisdictional application fees to become licensed.

ARE

- Cost: \$235 per division (six total divisions), plus \$235 per retake
- Funding recommendation: Full cost of each division plus one retake per division
- Purpose: Candidates must pass all six ARE divisions to become licensed; the majority of candidates fail at least one division. Offsetting the costs of one failed attempt may help candidates feel comfortable starting the exam.

NCARB provides a third-party payment option that enables firms to pay for NCARB-related licensure costs directly, rather than requiring employees to pay expenses up front and submit for reimbursement.

If your firm does not have the ability to provide direct financial support to all candidates, you can still provide support by helping your candidates find and apply for external financial support. This type of support may look like:

- Maintaining a list of external scholarships or grants for licensure costs
- Providing candidates with paid time to apply for scholarships or grants
- Assisting candidates with scholarship or grant applications

OTHER EXAM SUPPORT

Candidates preparing for and taking the ARE require support beyond payment for the cost of the exam. The benefits recommended below are designed to support candidates' mental health, prevent burnout, and improve exam performance.

Study Resources

Many candidates spend hundreds—if not thousands—of dollars on study resources and test prep materials for the ARE. NCARB recommends that firms maintain a library of study resources for candidates based on the list outlined in the [ARE Reference Guide](#).

In addition, firms may consider funding membership/subscriptions for third-party test prep materials; however, NCARB does not provide any official recommendations for third-party test prep materials.

Study and Testing Time

For many candidates, maintaining a healthy work/life balance while preparing for the ARE is challenging. NCARB recommends that firms provide paid time during work hours to study for and take the ARE, and work with their candidates to ensure no more than 40 hours of work are needed for several weeks prior to when the candidate is testing.

Keep in mind, time spent preparing for the ARE benefits both your firm and your candidate as they develop their professional knowledge and skills.

Firm Culture

Ensure that your firm creates a culture that celebrates candidates' successes and supports any failures along the path to licensure. Many candidates fear failing exam divisions and are reluctant to share their exam plans with their supervisor or mentor as a result. Offering to cover the cost of failed exam divisions and asking leadership to share stories around both exam successes and failures can create a positive firm culture around exam progress.

Encourage supervisors and mentors at your firm to ask candidates whether they are feeling ready to test. For those who may not feel ready to begin taking the ARE, explore how the firm can help them *become* ready and develop a strategy to address any areas of concern.

In addition, remind candidates that sharing their exam plans in advance allows their supervisor to make staffing adjustments as needed around their exam schedule, ensuring candidates aren't overwhelmed while preparing to test. Supervisors can also support candidates by offering confidentiality around exam successes and failures.

CREATING SUPPORT NETWORKS

Candidates may benefit from interpersonal support, whether from peers or mentors in the firm, or from individuals outside your firm. NCARB recommends encouraging candidates to establish their own external support networks and establishing the following support networks for licensure candidates at your firm:

Candidate Support Group

Depending on the size of your firm and the number of licensure candidates, you may choose to foster a community where candidates can coordinate study efforts, share advice and best practices, and develop informed licensure strategies. Potential approaches include:

- Cohorts: create cohorts of less than 10 candidates each, with the potential to include experienced practitioners as mentors
- Lunch-and-learn: establish regular events for all licensure candidates with rotating facilitators or speakers
- Community: for small firms, hosting candidates from outside your firm for regular candidate community meetings can foster networking opportunities as well as licensure support

Appointing an Architect Licensing Advisor

NCARB sponsors a community of [Architect Licensing Advisors](#) who help guide candidates along the path to licensure. By appointing an individual at your firm to serve as a licensing advisor, you'll gain access to NCARB's exclusive training and resources. Your advisor will join a vibrant community of professionals, educators, and students who volunteer their time to help others pursue licensure. If you do not have the capacity to have a licensing advisor, be sure to look up the nearest AIA Component Advisor and connect your staff with them.

ENSURING EQUITABLE ACCESS

As you work to create a culture of licensure support at your firm, it is critical that you ensure that candidates of all demographics, backgrounds, and career paths have access to licensure funding and resources. Best practices for establishing equitable access include:

- Communicate support opportunities when hiring: Include licensure support benefits with other employee benefit information, so that all new hires have access to detailed information about the funding and resources available to them.

- Add licensure support benefits to your employee handbook: Outline licensure support benefits alongside other employee benefit information, so it is easily accessed by all employees—see sample language outlined below.
- Train supervisors: Ensure that all AXP supervisors at your firm are trained to share licensure support information with candidates proactively, rather than waiting for candidates to request support.
- Promote additional support opportunities: In addition to support provided by your firm, be sure to promote other helpful resources to your licensure candidates, such as NCARB’s free practice exams and programmatic newsletters.

Sample Employee Handbook Language

Licensure Support Policy

[Firm name] offers a **Licensure Support Benefit** to assist employees who wish to pursue their architecture license. The benefit provides financial and material support to employees who are actively documenting experience through NCARB’s Architectural Experience Program® (AXP®) or taking NCARB’s Architect Registration Examination® (ARE®). Upon approval, licensure support funds will be paid directly to NCARB or to your state licensing board as needed.

Financial support:

1. NCARB Record Cost: The firm will pay the cost of your NCARB Record application (as a licensure candidate), as well as annual renewal fees.
2. ARE Fees: The firm will pay for the cost of one ARE appointment per ARE division, as well as one additional retake per division.
3. Jurisdiction Fees: The firm will pay all licensing board fees associated with your initial licensure application.

To be eligible, you must:

1. Be a full-time or part-time employee with more than 90 days of continuous service employed by [firm name].
2. Be approved by your immediate supervisor.

Application Procedures:

1. Meet with your immediate supervisor to discuss and obtain verbal approval.
2. Request licensure support assistance by emailing [insert appropriate HR contact].
3. Sign up for your NCARB Record and/or ARE appointments and submit a request for third-party payment, OR submit your state application and submit for reimbursement.
4. Human resources will notify you, along with your supervisor, when the third-party payment has been submitted.

NCARB Resources

The following NCARB resources may be helpful to candidates at various stages in their licensure process:

- [Destination Architect](#): For individuals just beginning their licensure journey, this video-based resource provides a basic overview of the licensure process
- [AXP Guidelines](#): This document details the requirements for completing NCARB's experience program
- [AXP and ARE Updates](#): These regular newsletters outline any programmatic updates, share tips and resources, and offer insights into completing the AXP and ARE strategically
- [ARE Guidelines](#): This document details the requirements for taking the ARE, outlines official policies, and explores exam content
- [Free ARE Practice Exams](#): NCARB's free practice exams are available to all candidates with an NCARB Record (and a PDF version is available to all, regardless of Record status) and are created to mimic the real exam
- [Licensing Requirements Tool](#): This interactive map can guide you through the licensing requirements in your jurisdiction and allow you to compare between jurisdictions

Best Practices for AXP Supervisors and Mentors

Supervisors and mentors play an important role in helping candidates complete the path to licensure, so it's vital that you have a basic understanding of the experience program, its goals, and the responsibilities involved. As a supervisor or mentor, your role is to encourage and support candidates' professional development by providing work assignments that will help them develop the ability to competently perform the tasks identified by the AXP.

With each work assignment, be sure to discuss which AXP experience area or task the assignment is related to, as well as how it fits within the project as a whole.

ESTABLISHING SHARED EXPECTATIONS

Supervisors should meet with candidates regularly to share their licensure progress, review experience reports, and explore next steps. Establishing shared expectations is key to building a healthy relationship, so be sure to discuss:

- How often you will meet with your licensure candidate
- Expectations regarding your candidate's ongoing work experience
- A strategy ensuring your candidate is assigned work opportunities that allow them to gain competency in all areas of the AXP
- Timing for submitting and reviewing experience reports

As a supervisor, you should be familiar with the AXP's goals, expectations, and benefits, so be sure to review the *AXP Guidelines* and become familiar with the program's requirements. NCARB has created two resources to assist supervisors with this process – the [AXP Candidate and Supervisor Expectations Guide](#) and the [Licensure Progress Worksheet](#).

UNDERSTANDING THE SUPERVISOR ROLE

NCARB's [AXP Supervisor Training](#) CE course is great resource for understanding your responsibility as a supervisor in ensuring that candidates are gaining competency—while also earning free CE credit! This course explains NCARB's requirements for AXP supervision, as well as practical and ethical considerations for supervisors and mentors. The course explains learning science related to professional training, how to give useful feedback, how to utilize the AXP to provide structured experience, and considerations of unconscious biases which may affect licensure candidates in their professional development. This free course also offers 1.5 HSW CEUs.

Then, learn more about how to best support candidates with NCARB's [Supervising With Impact](#) course for AXP supervisors. Candidates don't know what they don't know, and are often concerned about asking questions of experienced staff. Good AXP supervision requires knowledge of the six experience areas and the 96 tasks in the *AXP Guidelines*, as well as offering a plan to your candidate to gain competency in those tasks. Candidates know of these tasks but may not always know how they are applicable to the firm's work. Supervising with Impact is an informative training

course that will cover what candidates gain through their education and what is assessed in the ARE to create a whole picture of how to support candidates in the firm toward licensure as an architect. This free course offers 1.5 HSW CEUs.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EQUITABLE SUPERVISING

Data from NCARB and NOMA's [Baseline on Belonging study](#) showed that women and people of color were less likely to indicate they had a positive relationship with their AXP supervisor than their white, male peers. Disparities include issues related to their supervisor's support for their licensure goals, awareness of their licensure progress, and willingness to provide access to a variety of experience opportunities.

While NCARB's data on the path to licensure shows that diversity in the profession is increasing, it is critical that supervisors work proactively to manage their candidates equitably.

Supervisors should identify any ways in which their firm's culture could be hindering the professional development of women and people of color—for example, are women and people of color equally as likely as their white, male peers to be assigned to work across all areas of the AXP? Are any candidates regularly assigned only one type of project or task? It is important to be intentional about avoiding bias or discrimination in your own work as a supervisor.

It is necessary to ensure that all the licensure candidates you supervise gain high-quality experience across all areas to prepare them for the unlimited practice of architecture. Be thoughtful about your assignments. Support your employee's expressed interests, utilize their strengths, and be sure you are providing them the full preparation they need for licensure without bias.

For additional insights in this area, explore the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) [Guides for Equitable Practice: Workplace Culture](#).

PROVIDING SUPPORT BEYOND AXP

The role of the AXP supervisor does not need to end with a candidate's completion of the experience program. When meeting with your candidate, discuss overall licensure goals and identify next steps. Use NCARB's [Licensure Progress Worksheet](#) to guide your conversations and develop a strategy for ensuring your candidate meets their career goals.

Post-Licensure Recognition and Benefits

According to findings from NCARB and NOMA's [Baseline on Belonging study](#), white men were more likely than women and people of color to receive material benefits from their firm after earning a license—including receiving a promotion, raise, or new career opportunities. While not all firms are in a position to offer material benefits to newly licensed employees, being transparent about the process for receiving or applying for post-licensure career opportunities can reduce the risk of unconscious bias.

As a best practice, NCARB recommends clearly sharing benefit-related processes, timelines, and other information for candidates who become licensed architects while employed by your firm. Be sure to include any one-time bonuses, salary increases (or ranges), promotion application processes, or other opportunities that may be available to newly licensed individuals. This information can be included in your employee handbook or distributed to AXP supervisors to review with their candidates as they near the point of licensure.

Sharing these details proactively ensures that all candidates have equal access to information and can make strategic choices regarding their professional development.