

Landscape Architecture Body of Knowledge: What, Why and Why Now?¹

As professionals, we must work to meet changing needs and expectations. This makes it imperative that we attain adequate tools through formal education, experience, and life-long learning. We must assimilate new knowledges and practices and respond to changing realities. However, we cannot be merely reactive. We must anticipate shifts and work with them. With ever-expanding knowledge and technology, with ever more multifaceted information and understanding of our world, the “body of knowledge” that is expected of landscape architects, the core knowledge that helps define our profession, becomes somewhat daunting in its breadth, depth, and complexity.

The Landscape Architecture Body of Knowledge Study (LABOK) is the first time a majority of the landscape architectural organizations in North America have worked jointly on a specific project. In 2000, proposed changes to the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board’s (LAAB) accreditation standards led to discussions about changes in both practice and higher education. The American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA), and the Council of Landscape Architectural Registration Boards (CLARB) suggested that LAAB join them in a discussion concerning current expectations. Representatives from ASLA, CLARB, LAAB, and CELA first met in July 2000 to discuss what came to be called the common core of the profession – that which is expected of every landscape architect no matter what type of practice or research pursued. It became evident early on that this was not just a LAAB or CELA issue but one of vital importance to all, and it was suggested that the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects (CSLA) be invited to participate as well.

Participants in the 2000 meeting concluded that there could be no defensible consensus as to a body of knowledge for landscape architects without systematic research to ensure that the breadth of the profession was included. Prior research and resources were either outdated or specific in their focus. Albert Fein’s *A Study of the Profession of Landscape Architecture*, the last comprehensive examination of the profession, was published in 1972. CLARB’s Task Analyses address knowledge and skills required for licensing, a specific subset of the body of knowledge of the profession. At that

meeting, the idea of the LABOK Task Force was formed with the primary purpose of producing objective, scientific data that addressed educational and professional expectations. Through licensure, accreditation standards, and educational curricula, it was obvious that there was some body of knowledge upon which these were based, but it also seemed obvious that both the body of knowledge and expectations would change over time. What was needed was a systematic, quantifiable way to take a snapshot of a particular time, and, in the future, update the body of knowledge. Plans were made to develop a study plan, seek support from the landscape architecture organizations, and then develop a Request for Proposals to be sent to professional research groups.

The Task Force had to address two key questions:

- What are the core competencies shared by the profession in general that help define the profession?
- What is the fundamental body of knowledge that should be expected of all graduates from accredited schools?

Within these were more specific questions:

- Is there a definable core body of knowledge for landscape architecture? What should a licensed private practitioner in a design-build firm have in common with a professor researching visual preference? What do both have in common with the landscape architect working on policy and large scale planning in the public realm?
- Are these knowledge and/or skills mandatory or optional?
- To what degree (exposure, understanding, or mastery) should professionals possess these skills and knowledge?
- Should these be obtained at the first professional degree level or post-professional degree level? Are some of these to be attained through work experience? Continuing education? Are there areas of the profession that may be specializations-important, yet not expected of everyone?

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A reasonable organization for the survey document emerged over time. There are “knowledge” statements, which measure what we *know*, and “competency” statements, which deal with what we *do* with what we have learned. This organization marked a significant shift in the study. At the beginning of the study, survey statements were organized as either a “task” or “knowledge.” Tasks focus on specific, discrete activities. The Task Force decided that competencies, built upon the application of knowledge, would be better indicators of what professional expectations are. An additional benefit of competencies was the capability to reduce a large, cumbersome list. The domain of COMMUNICATIONS is a good example of the breadth and complexity of competencies in that they focus on the goals and results of communication rather than the tools used.

The basic questions were deceptively simple, as the Task Force and focus group participants soon discovered. Crafting the correct questions to ask proved to be a balancing act. Too much detail and the study instrument becomes unwieldy. Yet “inclusive” and “comprehensive” were always key objectives. One strategy was to make individual statements as broad as feasible by assuming that several implicit or unstated knowledges or competencies form the basis for a broad single statement, and recognizing that some knowledges and competencies are basic to several statements. For example, “plants and horticulture” are not explicitly given their own statement, but are vital to any knowledge of “natural site conditions and features,” “resource conservation, habitat restoration and urban ecology,” “landscape maintenance techniques,” and many other knowledge statements. Indeed, in the entire DOMAIN VI, SITE DESIGN AND ENGINEERING, it is difficult to find a knowledge statement that does not include plants. Likewise, competency in planting design is implicit in a number of explicit competency statements.

Through meetings, conference calls and e-mails, the LABOK Task Force worked with The Chauncey Group to clarify and refine the study instrument and to identify professionals for interviews, focus group, pilot study, and final survey. Task Force participants over the past few years include Sara Katherine Williams, FASLA (chair); Lu Gay Lanier, FASLA; Patrick Miller, FASLA; Gere Smith, FASLA; Peter Pollack, FASLA; Cecelia Paine, FCSLA; Fran Pauze; Clarence Chaffee; Vince McDermott, FASLA; Joanne Westphal, ASLA; Dan Donelin, FASLA; Timothy Keller, FASLA; Brian Orland, FASLA; and Ron Leighton. Representing the American Society of

Landscape Architecture, the Landscape Architectural Accreditation Board, the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture, the Canadian Society of Landscape Architects, and the Council of Landscape Architecture Registration Boards, these individuals’ significant time commitments and considerable experience made this project happen.

Many thanks are owed to the individuals who participated in interviews, the focus group, and the pilot study. For each group, the Task Force prepared a list of potential participants who represented the range of experience, practice type, demographics, region, and other variables. This list was compiled to get a representative cross-section of the profession and to enlist individuals known to be thoughtful contributors. Trying to summarize the depth and breadth of the profession into a workable study instrument was challenging, but watching it unfold was fascinating. The astuteness, richness of experiences, and passion of the participants has been gratifying.

The importance of the professionals who agreed to be interviewed and to participate in the focus group and pilot study cannot be overemphasized. The content of the body of knowledge was crafted by those individuals, and the final survey indicated relative importance. Interviews provided a long list of potential knowledges and competencies. These were edited by the focus group to construct a thorough yet workable survey document. A small representative segment of the LABOK Task Force further edited the survey document. This was sent out to a pilot group for further evaluation, and the resulting edits became the final survey.

Demographics were important so that there might be insights as to differences between subgroups, such as private vs. public vs. academic practice; office size; gender; or new vs. seasoned professionals. In each step, diversity of the profession would be a major factor in selecting participants. Task Force members consistently sought out those who were licensed and those who were not, those who fit into “traditional” types of practice, and those who were on the fringes or involved in cutting-edge work and research. Geographic and other issues were also considered.

Do the findings of the LABOK survey answer the basic questions? Not entirely in black and white. They are findings and must now be analyzed to ascertain their meaning. One participant in the LABOK pilot study group summed all this up quite well: “*Good survey, now what?*”

The following sections provide a beginning general analysis; however, LABOK may provide different interpretations and insights for different organizations. These findings give data upon which the various groups can base thoughtful discussions and make informed decisions. Thus, the meaning of the findings may differ from one organization to another based upon their specific mission and goals. CLARB, for example, can use LABOK to aid them in their imminent Task Analysis and in their ongoing investigations on apprenticeship (the years between graduation and licensure). Potential areas for continuing education can be identified. Schools can use the findings to evaluate curriculum and to validate their research, service and educational goals. The findings may also be used to communicate what landscape architects do. (It is interesting to note that “grading, drainage, and stormwater treatment” earned such a high score under “Command of Knowledge at Time of Professional Responsibility” when some governmental entities do not allow landscape architects to sign and seal drainage and stormwater documents.)

It must be recognized that LABOK is a snapshot of the profession’s expectations at this time. It was not within this study’s purpose to look to the future and determine what should be – although that is a task the profession must take on. The LABOK findings can serve as a starting point.

It is also reasonable to assume that our expectations may need to change. To play devil’s advocate: “history” was a more highly valued knowledge than “historic preservation principles.” Does that mean that preservation is not important? Is it a specialization? The American Institute of Architects’ *Vision 2000* study predicted that over 90% of building projects in the 21st century will involve standing and/or historic buildings. There are many reasons for this projection, including tax laws that provide incentives for preservation, the dwindling numbers of undeveloped sites, and the economic and social success of many revitalized historic areas. Might landscape architecture need to re-examine the future of preservation and our roles in it? Also, with changes in our technological, cultural, and environmental contexts, many survey issues that may seem “fringe” or specialized may take on more importance in the very near future. They might even be important now and we do not realize it yet. Staying within expectations will never move the profession to new levels. Clearly, all of the findings need to be examined in the larger context. Again, these findings are a basis for discussion – not a recipe for the average landscape architect.

In the evaluation of the findings, it is important not to pick out individual statements and statistics. The study should be analyzed as a whole to find patterns and relationships. The discussions presented here and in the next sections are exploratory. The constituent organizations will, amongst and between themselves, discuss what meanings the data may have for them. It has been suggested several times that this whole process be repeated in five to seven years so as to keep current with the profession. There have also been suggestions that different types of research studies build on LABOK.

There were contradictory responses within all the steps of the process: “*Too academic!*” “*Too private-practice oriented.*” “*Only specialists need to know X-delete it.*” “*No, X is vitally important to include.*” Concerns often arose about the needs of a particular segment of the profession being under- or over-emphasized. Balance was sought, but the survey inherently has limitations as to how much can be covered. One interesting insight from the demographic data is that “them” and “us” is perhaps less accurate than “we” based upon the high number of respondents who claim affiliation with multiple organizations.

A quantitative study such as this necessarily focuses on the “what” and not as much on the “how” or “why.” However, the survey participants’ written responses are included as Appendix J and give some useful insights and critiques, particularly as to the future. A constraint of this study is that it emphasized *current* expectations. Looking to the future is a critical exercise. As a profession, we are not defined merely by *what* we do, but also *how* we do it. Attempts were made to include the critical thinking and synthesis skills important to the processes of our profession, but again, this line of inquiry would be best served by another form of systematic research. The Task Force sees this study as a beginning, anticipating thorough analysis and multiple discussions and offering rich opportunities for further research. ■