Trimming Years Off the Path to Licensure
The University of Minnesota's School of Architecture is now offering a research and practice graduate degree program that opens a faster route to licensure.

By Wanda Lau

This year marks the centennial anniversary for the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, but it's not the only milestone for the program. This fall, the school also began offering a M.S. in Architecture with a concentration in Research Practices (MS-RP), a degree that aims to allow graduates with a B.Arch. or M.Arch. degree and substantial internship experience to complete the IDP, pass the architecture registration exam, and achieve licensure within six months of graduation.

As ARCHITECT reported in January, the average time for architecture graduates with a professional degree to attain licensure is 8.4 years. In the past few years, the National Council of Architectural Registration Boards (NCARB) had altered the licensure process to allow architecture students to earn 930 of the required 5,600 Intern Development Program (IDP) hours by attaining an NCARB-approved post-professional degree, and earn an additional 1,860 hours for teaching and academic research. Architecture students can also start accruing hours after high school.

UM was quick to react. A group of faculty members led by Renée Cheng, AIA, head of the School of Architecture and a professor there (Cheng is also a member of ARCHITECT’s editorial advisory committee), had already been ruminating on how to streamline the licensure process to reduce the internship time for architecture graduates. She crafted the MS-RP program with UM colleagues Jim Lutz, AIA; and Blaine Brownell, AIA, (who writes ARCHITECT’s Mind & Matter column); and Laura Lee, FAIA, a Carnegie Mellon University professor.
Students enrolled in the one-year MS-RP program will not only take coursework in research methods and analysis, but they will also spend 25 hours a week in a research practice internship. Based on their experience and interests, they will be paired with a faculty member and design firm in the Consortium for Research Practices to work on a research and practice (RP) internship. Students will spend 10 hours under a faculty member’s supervision and 15 with the consortium member, but given the program’s collaborative nature, the actual breakdown will vary depending on the project, Cheng says.

The program is possible, in part, because of the school’s integration with the local community, says Trevor Miller, director of external relations at UM’s College of Design. “We’re able to do it because we’re a large research institution in a metropolitan area, and we have strong ties to the professional community.”

The task of matching students with a faculty member and a consortium firm member falls on the shoulders of program director Cheng, who has embraced the opportunity but acknowledges that it has been a learning experience. Not surprisingly, the MS-RP program has garnered much attention from architecture students, professionals, other higher educational institutions, the AIA, and NCARB itself, which had invited Cheng to speak at its annual IDP Coordinators Conference in July. Though the program offers students the potential to complete the architecture internship process practically out of the gates, from NCARB’s point of view, it “is not that special,” Cheng says. “We didn’t do anything that breaks the rules.” And from the university’s perspective, like any other new degree program in any college, the program had to endure multiple levels of review by the faculty, college, and university to ensure its integrity.

One potential complication was that the program was elevated to go before UM’s board of regents, which meant it was perceived as a potential differentiator for the institution. The small downside to this was that the program had to await approval by the board, which meets only eight times a year. Subsequently, the school couldn’t advertise or recruit for the program until it received the all clear, which was in June.

While Cheng had anticipated between four and eight students for MS-RP program’s first year, the delayed kickoff meant that the program enrolled just one student this year. But at least six consortium firms will have projects going forward this academic year—four projects this fall and at least three projects in the spring semester. Along with the sole MS-RP student, three other students in the M.Arch program were selected to participate in the RP internships.

The enrolled MS-RP student’s grouping with a consortium firm and faculty member exemplifies the internship’s goals, Cheng says. Perkins+Will had proposed several research projects to the school, including one that focused on developing guidelines for pro bono healthcare design work in Africa and Southeast Asia. The student had just finished a year of service with the Peace Corps, building a clinic in

Steven Holl, FAIA, designed the 2002 addition to Ralph Rapson Hall, which houses the University of Minnesota School of Architecture.

Credit: Courtesy the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, College of Design

Renée Cheng, AIA, head of the University of Minnesota School of Architecture

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Africa, and one of the school’s faculty members was authoring guidebooks for designers working in developing countries. “When I realized that this alignment was happening, of these three to four ideas … this one we’ve got a real opportunity right now to do,” Cheng says.

Another student is working on a faculty member–driven project to develop customized, but economical, performative wall panels using digital fabrication. The two remaining internships involve Mortenson Construction. One project will examines the user experience with help from the school’s Virtual Reality Design Lab. For the second project, Mortenson partnered with DLR Group to research ways to streamline project delivery and reduce errors and omissions. Cheng, the faculty supervisor for this last project, says this study will likely be a long-term endeavor while other RP internships may wrap up in one or two semesters.

Students with an RP internship are compensated in the form of tuition reduction, which is provided through the school, and a stipend, which is paid by the consortium firm.

The school is currently waiting for the NCARB to open its 2013–14 application process so it can submit its MS-RP program to become an approved post-professional degree, thus granting graduates the 930 IDP hours for earning the degree. The school also recommends that MS-RP applicants enter the program with at least 2,800 IDP hours, or half of the required hours, under their belt. Students can then earn approximately 1,500 additional hours through the program’s research-intensive curriculum, teaching, and the RP internship itself in the fall, spring, and summer semesters.

Though developing the MS-RP program has been an exercise in patience and paperwork, the results are promising, Cheng says. “It’s incredibly satisfying and rewarding to see when things begin to align, and to realize that I can actually help the staff’s academic research, a firm’s pro-bono goals, and a firm’s long-term research goals.”
Student presentations, Ralph Rapson Hall.

Credit: Courtesy the University of Minnesota School of Architecture, College of Design

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