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What to expect applying to the AIA College of Fellows

By Carolyn Perricelli posted 6 days ago

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By Bridget Crowther, AIA staff

Summary

So, you want to be a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects? Fellowship in the Institute is one of the highest honors that the Institute can bestow upon its members. To get fellowship though, you are going to have to make the case to a jury of your peers. This is where it gets hard. There is a ton of wisdom and conflicting myths out there about what the jury is looking for.

As the AIA National staff for the program, I wanted to share the insights I have gathered over the years supporting the program, the jury, and providing feedback to unsuccessful candidates. I will debunk the most common myths I hear, the most common advice I give, the common mistakes, and the copious number of resources available to you on this endeavor.

This is not a small undertaking but if you are up for it, here is my best advice.

Program history

The modern AIA College of Fellows was founded in 1952. The college existed before in a couple of variations, but today's iteration is composed of members of the Institute who are elected to Fellowship by a jury of their peers.

The purpose of the College is to:

- Stimulate a sharing of interests among Fellows.
- Promote the purposes of the institute.
- Advance the profession of Architecture.
- Mentor young Architects
- Be of ever-increasing service to society.

Of the 90,000 + members, only three percent are Fellows.

Who applies?

The first question really should be what members make up that three percent? Members from all corners of the industry apply, from sole practitioners to partners in multinational offices, from the rural Midwest and the heart of Manhattan. There is no one story that is going to be a slam dunk application for fellowship.

This is where we see the most myths:

- **Only architects from New York and Los Angeles get elevated.** I am here to tell you this is simply not true. There are more architects in New York and LA so, optically it seems that there are more elevated individuals from these locales. The most successful component at getting their members elevated in recent history is Minnesota.
- **Only architects from large firms get elevated.** This is also a common misconception. Architects from large firms are not elevated at any higher rate than anyone else. Often, they are frequently dinged for not sharing their knowledge/talents/skills outside their firm.

But what about all the other identifying factors for members? We have only been tracking this information for the last couple of years but as you can see in the [equity diversity data](#) the class is reflective of the membership as a whole: one-third is female, and three-quarters are white.

Which object do they apply in? Well in 2021, over half of the applications were in Object 2: Practice and most of those were in the sub-object of Practice Management. The runner-up is Object 1: Design which really only makes up a quarter of the class.

The other question we get a lot is: at what stage of their career would be ideal for candidates to apply? These days we get applications that run the gamut. It could be anywhere from having just completed their full ten years of membership to qualifying to members at the end of their career.

Are you eligible?

So you are still interested in becoming a fellow? Great, next question: Are you eligible? To be eligible to apply you have to be a fully licensed Architect and have maintained your membership in AIA for a full ten years by the application due date. If you have had a broken membership history or are not sure if you have the 10 years of membership you can email aiamembershiphistory@aia.org and national staff can help go through your record. If you apply prematurely there are no refunds when you are disqualified.

If you are not eligible just yet, that is ok. You can still get started on your application. These things take time. Start pulling together the list of your work history, your speaking engagements, publications, and get photos of projects taken. When you are eligible then you will have a good head start on the raw materials for your case.

What object? Who are you? What is your case?

If you are eligible, now comes the fun part --putting together the portfolio for the jury review. The most important thing to start with is determining what object you are applying to. There are six objects, all with sub-objects. Choose the object and sub-object where you can show how your achievements have benefited the profession beyond your firm and your community.

Selecting the right object and then sub-object is really important. Each object and sub-object will prompt the jury on how to look at your portfolio. Many of you have lengthy and interesting careers that might be able to make a case in a couple of objects. Pick the strongest one with the most flushed-out story. Being split between objects or even sub-objects is the path to disappointment.

Once you have the object picked out, now is the time to tailor your portfolio to make the case. Make sure you take the time to tell your story.

Sponsor letter

There is a lot of wisdom around who should be your sponsor and what this letter should be. What it needs to be is the best introduction to your portfolio it can be, written by someone that knows you well. It should be someone from outside your firm. Your boss or your partner may know you well but it will immediately limit the scope of your impact on the jury.

It should say what object you are applying to. It should state your case for elevation. It should provide two to three specifics of your career. It should introduce your impact on the profession.

Section One: Summary

The very first page you will write is your summary statement and summary. This page should be the outline of your case. Be clear and concise and make your case for elevation here. Every page that comes after should be supportive of the case made on this page.

Section Two: Accomplishments

The next nineteen pages are for the high-level look at your career. It is mostly made up of lists of your projects, awards, publications, speaking engagements, and AIA involvement. Cull these lists to be supportive of the case you are trying to make. Irrelevant items cloud your case and frustrate the jury. For

example, if you are applying to Led the Institute, do not spend a lot of time talking about your design projects.

Many of these things will serve as a demonstration of your “ripple effect”. This means if your awards/speaking/publications are with a non-AIA body, explain who the audience of or provide a summary statement of the presentation/award/publication so that the Fellows jury can see the impact.

Call out what is beyond your firm and community. Local awards and speaking engagements are not going to be enough. If you are at a large firm, internal awards and speaking engagements are part of doing your job and are not making your case-- drop them.

Section Three: Exhibits

These twenty pages are for deep dives into specific examples of your work that help make your case. Pick the best six to ten projects and take the time to really talk about your role, the outcome, and the impact of the project. If you have an overarching methodology, take an exhibit to explain it, and then the exhibits that follow to demonstrate it. Provide information that helps the jury understand what you are talking about. Would a site plan be useful to understand your role? If so, include it. Are you in technical advancement? Provide the technical details. This is not the time for marketing language; you are not selling the building, you are explaining to the jury how you did it and its larger impact.

Section four: Reference letters

Who you pick to write these letters is important. You want strong writers that know your work and can focus on a specific item that you highlight in the portfolio. Big names usually write generic letters, they are not helpful. After you have five AIA member letters you can have other people provide a reference. Look for someone from outside the industry that might be able to reinforce your impact on the larger community.

Common pitfalls:

There are some common mistakes that will not get you elevated:

- AIA status, or rather lack of AIA status, the status of your sponsor and reference writers.
- Pages larger than the standard 8.5 x 11 inches.
- More than 40 pages, more than 20 exhibit pages
- Forgetting declarations.

Common feedback for candidates that are not elevated are:

- **Lack of ripple effect.** This is really common. You do a great job at your job, excellent! That is not enough for fellowship. How are you impacting the profession beyond your firm and community? Depending on your object, it is demonstrated in a number of ways, from speaking engagements to awards. However, those awards, speaking engagements, and publications are limited to your hometown it is not going to be enough for the jury. You have to show how you have shared what you have learned over the course of your career and how it improves the profession. Depending on your

object, it does not mean you have to speak at AIA National or necessarily have a national award, but you do need to leave your home state once in a while.

- **Not being involved in the AIA.** It is a fellowship in the American Institute of Architects. If you are not involved in the Institute, it is going to be challenging to become a fellow and represent the institute through its highest designation.
- **Not following the directions.** The jury is reviewing hundreds of applications, you want to make it as easy as possible on them. Stick to the directions and provide them with the information they are looking for in the order they are looking for it in.
- **Marketing speak.** You have a great marketing department, they are really skilled at what they do; however, a fellowship application is not necessarily a job for them. Have them help with photos and layout, but make sure you work on narratives. The narrative makes your case for elevation; the photos are just a bonus.

Timeline

This takes a lot of work--be prepared for that. If you do not already have a lot of documentation and support from a community, it's going to take somewhere between a year and 18 months to get your portfolio together.

A year to eighteen months

- Start making the lists of awards, speaking engagements, publications, projects.
- Get the photos of projects.

A year to nine months

- Which object?
- What is your case? Write a draft of your summary statement and summary page.

Nine months to six months out

- Preliminary writing - do the first draft of exhibits.
- Get feedback from others.

Six to three months out

- Make initial contact with your references.
- Keep writing and editing.

Three months out

- Start our online application.
- Send the reference requests.
- Get more feedback.

Two months out

- Check-in with references.

- Copyright file—seriously this takes time. We do need the copyright information for all the photos. If you pulled it from a website, then we need that information as well. It does not have to be perfect, but you have to make an effort.
- Finalize the layout.

One month out:

- Final touches on your portfolio
- Check-in on reference writers.
- If you are done, turn it in.

Due date: First Tuesday of October at 5pm ET

- Do not be the person that is trying to turn it in at 5pm ET. Like your printer, it will break the minute you need it. We do not accept late submissions.

Resources

There is a ton of information out there to help with your application process. From National, the most useful place to start is the [Fellowship webpage](#). There you can find:

- The objects
- A sample application
- Best examples
- Frequently asked questions—please, if you have a question [check here](#) first, there is a ton of great information here—from who can write a letter to photo requirements.

If the answer is not on the website, you can email AIA National staff at honorsawards@aia.org and we will be happy to help you.

If you need to check your membership status and if you are in good standing, you should be able to view it on your dashboard. If you need help, please contact membership@aia.org.

If you need to verify your eligibility, please email aiamembershiphistory@aia.org.

Also, reach out to your local components. Most—either at the local level or at the state level—have a fellowship committee that is in a great position to help you. These committees are usually made up of local fellows looking to support candidates. Every locality has a slightly different process, but they will help with reviewing and refining your case and portfolio and are a great source of information and support.

Conclusion

Fellowship is a huge honor, only granted upon a small selection of the membership to recognize the work they are doing and the impact on the profession. As a result, the application process is a lot of work as well. Take the time and space to tell your story clearly with specific examples. Remember, it is not just doing a good job at your job but how you impact the profession.

Good luck!

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