

Executive summary

The Carbon Literacy Sprint emerged as a key recommendation of the 2021 AIA Strategic Council’s Scalable Climate Action (SCA) Sprint. The overarching goal of the SCA was to plan actions that will significantly reduce the design and construction industry’s impact on the climate in the next 10 years. The Carbon Literacy Sprint aims to define carbon literacy and explore creating a credential to support greater carbon literacy within the profession.

To support this goal, the Carbon Literacy Sprint team strongly recommends developing new educational content, as outlined in this report, to create a Carbon Literacy Certificate in 2023. In addition, we recommend leveraging existing educational resources as well as new content to create a new Carbon Literacy Certification program over the next two years.

AIA goals

- Two of AIA’s major guiding documents underscore the need for carbon literacy. Both the AIA Code of Ethics and the 2021–2025 AIA Strategic Plan speak to the need for architects to embrace climate action.
- Canon VI of the AIA Code of Ethics describes the architect’s obligations to the environment. Although Canon VI does not specifically refer to carbon emissions, it states that architects should “implement energy and resource-conscious design.” Further, Rule 6.501 states that “Members shall consider with their clients the environmental effects of their project decisions.”
- One of the two strategic goals in the Strategic Plan is “Climate action for human and ecological health.” For AIA to reach this goal, and to adhere to Rule 6.501, architects must have the education and resources to understand and measure potential environmental impacts.

Urgency of action

It is crucial that the world address carbon emissions immediately, and with urgency over the next eight to 10 years, in order to avoid global temperature increases from exceeding 1.5°C. According to the 2021 AIA-CLF (Carbon Leadership Forum) Embodied Carbon Toolkit, “global net anthropogenic CO₂ emissions must decline by about 45% from 2010 levels by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050. This means that we have until 2030 to radically decarbonize the building industry.” AIA has an opportunity to lead on this issue, but we can only do so if our profession has the knowledge and resources to take immediate action.

A May 2022 informal poll of the AIA Strategic Council found that despite the Code of Ethics Rule, 22% of Strategic Council respondents only sometimes or rarely consider the environmental impacts of their projects. More broadly, AIA’s 2020 Sustainability & Resilience Trend Survey Report found that only one-third of AIA members are confident discussing carbon with their clients. Imagine if that were true for structure or budgets.

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The approach

We recommend a three-tier approach to achieve carbon literacy for architects.

1. Carbon Essentials: a one-CEU online course geared to all AIA members.

- Goal: The Carbon Essentials course is taken by the entire membership in 2023. We recommend making this first course a free resource to encourage participation and offer a preview of the quality information available in the certificate program.

2. Carbon Literacy Certificate: an AIAU online program composed of seven courses, including Carbon Essentials. This course would be available online for individuals; components would be encouraged to offer it as a program.

- Goal: 5% of the membership completes the certificate in 2024; 15% completes it by 2025.

3. Carbon Literacy Certification: based on the successful completion of four certificate programs, and a summative experience/exam to demonstrate competency.

- Goal: Certification released in early 2025.
- Goal: Intended for self-identified carbon literacy experts, about 5% of members plus others.

The proposed certification would be built using the following new and existing programs:

Embodied Carbon	<i>Existing</i>
Materials	<i>Existing</i>
Carbon Literacy	<i>New</i>
AIA 2030+	<i>Existing</i>
In-person component and/or exam to demonstrate mastery	<i>New</i>

AIA Certification

Twenty years ago, AIA failed to take leadership within the burgeoning sustainability movement and a generation of architects looked to the US Green Building Council for their education and credentialing. The 2017 Credentialing Report and Proposal outlined potential issues related to creating an AIA-sponsored credential and recommended that AIA remain open to the possibility, given a specific need. Given the existential threat climate change poses, AIA has recognized climate action as its highest organizational priority. A well-developed, comprehensive certification will provide AIA with a means to support its members and lead the profession into the next generation.

Proposed next steps

Certificate and Certification Development

Due to the urgent nature of this action, we propose developing the certificate program within the next year and the certification program within 18 months.