A research agenda could suggest areas ripe for thesis topics and dissertations to help stimulate graduate-level research. It might propose projects of immediate relevance, but it should also include inquiries into topics that may apply more speculatively to the profession—the kind of exploration critical to bringing new ideas to the surface. Potential solutions identified by the academy can be tested by practice. In turn, new areas of interest to the academy will emerge from practice as well.

Evidence-based design offers a great opportunity for the profession—the chance to build a dynamic relationship between academia and practice by establishing a research agenda for landscape architecture at a national level. A national research agenda would not restrict or bias the research efforts of the academy. Rather, it would aggregate and give structure to the many issues of research important to the profession and identify a context for investigation. Although there is clearly a place for research within professional practice, it is the academy that must provide leadership. Some landscape architecture degree programs are emphasizing evidence-based design, and others have active research programs. But the profession needs a way to raise the visibility of these research efforts. Ideally, an organization such as the Council of Educators in Landscape Architecture (CELA), perhaps in conjunction with the Landscape Architecture Foundation Performance Series, would conduct a periodic survey of the profession to identify topics of research interest and schools where they are a focus.

CELA has historically played an important role in fostering a research community, and ASLA’s Professional Practice Networks have circulated and promoted research that is closely linked with practice. The new National Academy of Environmental Design, a consortium of national design organizations including ASLA, will further advance research within the design professions.

There are two areas of concern, however. The first is that some academicians are suspicious of privately funded research and its whiff of potential bias. Rather than turn away private funding, we need clear standards to ensure objectivity. The second concern is that some academic programs are eliminating the requirement of a thesis for the graduate degree, substituting instead a final project that, in many cases, is not a framework for rigorous research. Graduate students are often poorly prepared to conduct thesis research because of a lack of training at an undergraduate level.

Design approaches without evidence are based on theory alone. Our obligation to maintain the health, safety, and well-being of society demands more. Evidence-based design suggests a need for research in multiple areas, such as sociology, community planning, and economics, as well as traditional design issues. Our efforts must be built upon the collaborative efforts of private practice and the academy guided by a national research agenda that gives focus to our work.