



# GREEN edge

LEED ACCREDITATION: NOT A MEASURE  
OF SUSTAINABILITY EXPERTISE

BY JASON F. MCLENNAN AND PETER RUMSEY, PE, CEM

With the creation of the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) professional accreditation program for designers and building industry practitioners, a new industry has been born. All over the country individuals who have passed a written test are putting the words LEED AP (accredited professional) on their business cards. The USGBC Web site lists thousands of names of accredited professionals, and this number is growing fast.

As we've made clear in our previous columns, the two of us are huge supporters of the USGBC and the LEED protocol. We are also supporters of accreditation on the individual level. But currently there is a problem that we feel is justified to point out.

The idea behind creating an accreditation for individuals is a solid one, the fact that it is an 'easy' point within the LEED rating system is also incredibly clever marketing on the part of the Council who have built in nested source of revenue. Theoretically, having someone on a design team who is knowledgeable about green will do much to improve the environmental performance of the project, especially in areas where LEED is not explicit. We also do not fault individuals for wanting to distinguish themselves by announcing that they've passed the test.

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DIALOGUE AND DEBATE FOR THE USGBC.  
LET'S RAISE THE BAR TOGETHER”.

So, what is the problem? The problem is the test itself. It's too easy. The test does a poor job of truly gauging an individual's knowledge of sustainable design. It certainly does not provide a good indicator of this person's ability to help make difficult decisions during the design process to maximize the environmental performance of the project while minimizing its costs.

We urge everybody to read and familiarize himself or herself with the LEED point structure and then go out and take the test. Regardless of how much you know about architecture or sustainability, you will likely pass the test. Half of the test gauges knowledge about the tool itself and the other half is a watered down list of green design questions that are generically presented and do not test true knowledge. Being multiple choices makes it even simpler.

There is an army of individuals currently presenting themselves as knowledgeable based on an accreditation system that is too weak to do the movement justice. The LEED accreditation has given them instant credibility and clients are blindly trusting

that the accreditation is a sound judge of their knowledge. This is not an unreasonable assumption. The USGBC owes it to their constituents to hold its practitioners to the same high level of performance that it is pushing for in its buildings.

Recently we have heard from several clients that had hired a LEED AP and had assumed that they were knowledgeable about sustainable design. They had to fire these individuals when it was clear that they did not in fact know the topic well. This is unfortunate for them (credibility is hard won and easily lost – one shouldn't portray themselves as an expert based on taking a short multiple choice exam) but also unfortunate for the Council as it weakens the brand and diminishes the credibility of everyone in the industry.

As usual, the two of us have some suggestions for what could be improved. Some of our ideas include:

- Require a minimum level of training before being eligible for the exam. This could include university degrees in design related disciplines, training courses, etc.



- Require a minimum level of experience working on sustainable projects before being eligible for the exam. For example a minimum of two years of design experience under another LEED AP or design of five projects that received LEED certification.
- Have a more detailed review of an applicant's qualifications by the USGBC before allowing the applicant to take the exam.
- Break the exam into five parts corresponding to the five categories and require that the applicant pass an in depth exam on two of the five parts. Shouldn't there be different LEED accreditation for architects and engineers? Doesn't a landscape architect need to understand more about sustainable site design than an interior designer?
- Two levels of accreditation could be possible. One for a basic understanding of the LEED system and one that is a more in depth knowledge and experience accreditation.

- Either drop the LEED AP point or alter it to insure that the designers on the project have a more in depth knowledge of sustainable design.

The USGBC says it plans to revise the exam in the next six months. We hope that this adds to the dialogue and debate for the USGBC. Let's raise the bar together. In the meantime, clients beware of the LEED AP designation. Ask them what they really know. +

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