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INTRODUCTION

In fall 2016, the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) and OFS Brands, held a series of inaugural Student Roundtables in Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta, inviting interior design students in each city to convene with a small group of design practitioners for an evening of discussion about the future of the industry. A cross-section of students was represented at the events, including undergraduates, career-changers, international students, and those pursuing master’s degrees, allowing multiple perspectives to participate in a conversation that is often dominated by design professionals who are specifically discussing traditional-aged students attending four-year universities. It was a rare opportunity for an open dialogue between these groups about the challenges students face when transitioning into interior design careers, the gaps that exist between classroom preparation and workplace realities, and the next generation’s vision for interior design.

“Conversations like the Student Roundtable are rare, but they are so important. Students, design professionals, and manufacturers reps can be resources for one another. There’s so much to be learned by listening to different perspectives and hearing from the next generation is particularly eye opening.”

Doug Shapiro, Industry IIDA Vice President of Marketing, OFS Brands
DISCOVERING DESIGN

In each city, moderator Ryan Ben, student engagement and advancement manager at IIDA, opened the discussion with a simple question: “Why did you choose interior design?” The students’ answers varied, but a common thread ran through the roundtables: Discovering interior design as a potential profession was a revelation—many didn’t know the career even existed until college.

Lack of awareness of interior design is no secret among professionals. When students are asked to declare majors in their first or second year of college, many don’t realize that interior design is an option, making it critical that students learn about this career path in high school. The IIDA Industry Roundtable 19 report, Design and Diversity, cites reduced funding for arts education in public schools as one of the contributing issues, particularly in underfunded schools. But a handful of student participants had been exposed to the field prior to entering higher education. “My high school actually offered an interior design elective course that I ended up taking. I didn’t know anything about it, so that’s where I was introduced to interior design as a career choice and a field in general. I feel like it isn’t super common for a high school to offer that kind of course,” said one student in Chicago.

But once students were introduced to interior design, it felt like a merging of their creative pursuits and analytical skills. Most felt they had been “designing”—thinking about space, planning space, determining how the elements in a space affect people—for years before realizing it had a name and they could major in it. “I’m constantly being pulled in both the analytical direction and creative direction. Interior design is in between that and has made use of the skillset I have,” said another student in Chicago.

Another factor in the decision to pursue design? Most young designers recognize that they can make a difference through design, which speaks directly to what motivates this generation—an overwhelming majority wants to use their skills for good. “Interior design is so important because people spend 90 percent of their lives indoors and mostly in commercial interiors like offices, traveling, restaurants, and stores. A poorly designed space can really have a negative effect on you,” said a student in L.A. Drawing more students to the field of interior design means appealing to their humanistic tendencies.
DEFINING DESIGN

At the roundtables, there were as many definitions of interior design as there were students participating. Not surprising as the scope of the job can vary from firm to firm (not to mention state to state), adding to design’s identity issue. But a few common themes did emerge. People feel in a certain space. I have to explain that a material isn’t just used because it’s pretty. There’s a purpose.”

In order to design for all people, interior designers must understand the multitude of systems that go into a building then work with those systems to reach the goals of the client. “You are promoting the safety of an environment and the well-being of that environment as well as applying codes in order to make the space accessible not just for one type of person, but for everyone,” said a professional in New York.

INTERIOR DESIGN MARRIES ART AND BUSINESS.

Many students lamented the assumption by family and friends that they are “choosing paint colors” and “picking out throw pillows”—this common misconception doesn’t even begin to describe the job of a commercial interior designer. Students understand that from business savvy to branding expertise to an understanding of psychology, to be a designer is to be a jack of all trades. “[Interior designers] get very involved with strategy,” said one student in Chicago. “We have to understand the thinking behind why we are doing certain things.”

INTERIOR DESIGN IS ABOUT PEOPLE.

For students, the core of the Interior Design profession is people—creating spaces for people that promote productivity, wellbeing, and happiness. Designers must go beyond aesthetics to understand how a space will be used by the people who will move through it. “It’s like a combination of the structure of the space and the behavior within the space,” observed one student in Chicago. “We have to take into consideration how people feel in a certain space. I have to explain that a material isn’t just used because it’s pretty. There’s a purpose.”

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To that end, second-career professionals find that skills from their previous work lives are often transferable and add value to their firms and clients. “I’ve used [my business experience] every day in my firm,” said one career changer in Chicago. Professionals agreed that having five or more years of work experience prior to becoming a designer allows these professionals to bring a different perspective to the table, which almost always benefits their employers and often makes the transition from student to employee smoother.

**INTERIOR DESIGN IS TO ARCHITECTURE AS...**

Unsurprisingly, it’s not uncommon to hear students discuss and define interior design in the context of how it relates to its sister profession, architecture. “If you are an architect, you think first about the surrounding environment,” said one student in Los Angeles. “[Interior designers] are trying to reflect our client’s personality and the organization’s culture, history, and workload.” It’s an inside vs. outside mentality that requires the professions to collaborate and understand each other.
Research indicates that people spend approximately 90 percent of their time indoors.

National Human Activity Pattern Survey
Students represent, quite literally, the next generation of interior design, so it’s important to understand their vision for the future—what matters now that won’t in five or 10 years; what will define the industry over the next decade; how will current design trends play out? These themes resonated with students at each of the roundtables.

THE ROLE OF DESIGN AND DESIGNERS WILL CONTINUE TO EXPAND.

It’s an exciting time to be an interior designer. As one professional in Atlanta put it, “Right now, [interior designers] have more power and influence than we’ve ever had. There is more belief in our value than there ever has been and awareness about what we can do to affect people every day.” Design will only become more critical as it demonstrates its capacity to provide creative solutions to the problems that plague our society. “Consider homelessness or weather events that cause massive damage to homes, as designers we can come in and create solutions for temporary living—those are worthwhile things to spend time thinking about.” The future of design will truly change the world for the better.
WORKPLACE WELL-BEING AND SUSTAINABILITY ARE HERE TO STAY.
Don’t call well-being and sustainability a trend—“Everyone is just doing it now,” said a student in New York. And the focus is likely to shift from the “green design” of the 2000s, addressing energy inefficiencies and environmentally friendly building materials, among other things, to encompassing the whole person. “We spend more than 90 percent of our lives indoors,” this statistic from the National Human Activity Pattern Survey was cited by several students at multiple roundtables—and much of that time is spent at work. Well-being in the workplace includes the air quality, access to daylight and green space, and the quality of food and water available, and design is leading the charge. Students don’t see that changing anytime soon.

“WE NO LONGER WANT TECHNOLOGY for technology’s sake.”

WE WILL THINK DIFFERENT ABOUT HOW TECHNOLOGY IS APPLIED TO DESIGN.
Often, when we talk about technology and design, we get caught up in workplace connectivity, the latest gadgets, and tech integration—but as our lives become ever more entangled with technology, smart design will be about regaining the human connection. “We no longer want technology for technology’s sake. There was such a tech boom that we went overboard. Now we’re looking at technology to aid the design, enhance it, but not drive it,” said a student in Atlanta.

COMMERCIAL DESIGN WILL BE PERSONALIZED.
There’s a lot of conversation among commercial interior designers today about how to make an office work for employees who have different needs in regards to privacy, work style, learning abilities, and job responsibilities while available space is shrinking and collaboration is king. The answer likely lies in pushing the boundaries of what we think of as “flexible” workplace design. “The ability to make changes to where people are—that level of personal control—I don’t see that now and it is coming. You are not just going to walk into a space and that is how it is. It’s going to change to fit the user,” said one student in Atlanta.
What does it take to be a valued entry-level designer?
According to the 2016 IIDA Educators Roundtable report, “What design practitioners prized above all else was social/emotional intelligence and client savvy,” along with a solid technical skillset. The design professionals at the Student Roundtables agreed. Students—take note. This is what your future managers are looking for.

HONE YOUR SOFT SKILLS.
Students cannot underestimate the value of soft skills—being able to communicate effectively, connecting with the team, having the confidence to interface with clients and senior leaders. “Communication is so important. Being able to express yourself whether visually or verbally, you need to be able to tell a story about your work, how you made choices and overcame challenges, and what your ideas were because we are telling our clients stories with our designs,” said a professional in Chicago. Or, as one professional in New York put it, “I try to hire people that I would have no problem putting in front of clients.” The word “authentic” was used at the roundtables by both professionals and students—people want to work with people who are genuine, curious, respectful, well-rounded, and have a positive attitude.

FIRM EXPECTATIONS

BE WILLING TO LEARN (AND UNDERSTAND THAT YOU STILL HAVE A LOT TO LEARN).
No one is expecting students to know-it-all when they walk into a firm as newbies, and ego is a turn off when hiring entry-level employees. Confidence is importance, but understand that confidence doesn’t mean having every answer or being the loudest person in the room—in fact, as a young professional, you should be more focused on learning. One professional in Chicago illustrated this with an anecdote from his first post-college work experience, “I was really fortunate when I started working because I was like, ‘I can do it all,’ and my manager sat me down and said, ‘No you can’t. You’ve got a great base, but there’s a lot more to know.’” Instead, be positive, hard-
working, and ready to dive in. “Have a great attitude and be willing to learn, willing to help, and willing to do whatever it takes to get there. As employers, we all look for people who have passion, but they also want to help and are willing to jump into a situation,” continued the professional in Chicago. In other words, be ready to hit the ground running, but don’t be afraid to ask for guidance.

UNDERSTAND THAT TECHNICAL SKILLS ARE YOUR FOUNDATION.

If your resume was picked out of a pile, a firm assumes you have a basic level of technical design ability. But technical skills—like being able to use rendering programs AutoCAD and Revit—seem to be a point of contention between professionals and students. Students are concerned about being shut out of the design process as entry-level employees, instead being asked to execute their more senior coworkers’ designs on the computer.

According to the professionals, this won’t necessarily be the case, but students should expect to “pay their dues” as new designers. “There’s a balance between, ‘I have a lot to learn,’ and ‘I have a lot to give,’” said a professional in New York. Another professional’s point of view, “In reality, these are the tools we use to get our designs built. Creating construction documents is design. That is absolutely where the rubber meets the road.” And there is value in this as one student in L.A. recognized, “When you are doing construction documents and learning about how things are built, that helps you make better design decisions in the future.” You have to learn to walk before you can run.

THERE’S A REASON IT’S CALLED A “PRACTICE.”

Failure is part of the design process—a tough lesson new designers need to learn. “You have to have a thick skin,” noted a student in L.A. “Sometimes a client or a manager will say, ‘I don’t want this, I want that… I don’t like this at all,’ and you have to be able to go, ‘OK, how do we fix this?’ You put a lot of energy and emotion into a design and then somebody says, ‘No.’ It’s hard to take, but it’s part of the job.” Failure is scary, but also necessary in a profession like design, which requires its practitioners to push boundaries. “You won’t learn as much if you are completely right all the time. You’ll never keep searching and finding new solutions,” said a professional in Chicago. Most importantly, don’t take it personally. “It’s part of the job. Learn from it, grow, push yourself, and persevere. Take failure as an opportunity.”

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NAILING THE INTERVIEW

Here are six quick tips about how to make a great first impression when interviewing from the professionals who participated in the Student Roundtables:

1. Ask questions. Show an interest in the work the firm is doing.
2. Talk about process, not just projects. Demonstrate how you overcame challenges.
3. Make a real connection with the people in the room. Show you can be part of the team. Be authentic and positive.
4. Be confident in your work and who you are; however, ego isn’t going to play well.
5. Remember: It’s about finding the right fit on both ends; not just about getting hired.
6. Say thank you with a thoughtful email or handwritten note (yes, thank you notes are still a thing).
Beyond the age-old advice of getting out there and networking, here are the tips design professionals had for students.

**INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS**

If you’re not ready to begin applying for full-time positions, informational interviews can be a great way to get to know area firms, make connections, and prepare for actual job interviews. “Most companies, if you reach out to the design director or someone in business development, you will likely get an interview as long as you say, ‘I’m not prepared to start interviewing for a job, but I’m inspired by the work you do and it aligns with what I think about in terms of design.’ I know that if someone sent me that email, I’d set up an interview. It’s the best practice you can get for actual interviewing and no one ever takes us up on it,” said a professional in New York. And don’t underestimate the value of informational interviews with manufacturers representatives. “Product reps are going to see 30 offices and they are welcomed to all these places and they all have different cultures,” said Shapiro of OFS Brands. “They can help connect you with firms that are going to have the vibe and the people and the feeling that you are looking for.”

**IIDA STUDENT MENTORING PROGRAM**

IIDA has a robust mentoring program, pairing more than 1,000 students and professionals, and has recently expanded its annual Student Mentoring Program to last a full month. Typical is a one-day in-person exchange, but the organization also supports remote mentoring, which many students take advantage of. “Everyone wants to mentor with a firm principal, but we aim to show students what jobs and titles they didn’t know existed,” said moderator Ryan Ben. IIDA can also help facilitate informal mentoring.

**COURSE CATALOGUE**

Think outside your interior design program. Students and design professionals at the roundtables recognized that interior design isn’t just about interior design.
Classes outside of the major that may be worth checking out: business, finance, human resources, math, art, urban studies, psychology, urban planning, and public speaking, among others. You'll find all of these complement your interior design education.

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS
IIDA Student Members have a world of resources available to them. A tip for getting the most out of your membership: Look beyond the student-specific benefits. It’s easy to use IIDA for one or two programs, like mentoring or the Student Design Competition, but there is so much more. From industry publications that keep you up-to-date on what the pros are paying attention to, to award opportunities, to educational programming at design conferences, to local chapters that offer events and other opportunities to get involved—as a student, you can take advantage of everything IIDA has to offer. Most importantly, the relationships students build and the exposure available through IIDA are invaluable as you head out into the workforce.

INTERN. INTERN. INTERN.
Internships are de rigueur among this rising generation, but be strategic about the work experiences you have during your college years. Use this time to make your way through the industry and understand it from all angles. “Try and spend time at different-sized firms that do different types of projects because then you can see where you fit in and what you want to pursue,” offered one professional in L.A. There is important information to be gathered about your career path from every interior design experience in firms as well as at manufacturers.

HOW TO FIND A MENTOR
Again and again, students are told to find mentors who can guide them through their careers. For many students, “mentor” means a formal relationship with someone who has reached the senior level in the field. Connecting with these leaders can seem intimidating, if not unattainable. Professionals in L.A. encouraged students to think differently about what it means to have a mentor.

YOU CAN HAVE MORE THAN ONE MENTOR.
There’s value in having multiple mentors who serve multiple purposes and can expose you to different aspects of the industry. “You don’t necessarily have to have one. You can find a mentor who is more technical and maybe a mentor who can teach you how to survive in the office. I think it’s important not to be just like, ‘I have to find that one person who’s going to be so great.’ You can’t get exposed to everything while you are in school, so finding those mentors everywhere is really important,” said a professional in L.A.

YOU DON’T HAVE TO BE MENTORED BY A FIRM PRINCIPAL.
Often the most valuable mentors aren’t the ones at the top of the corporate ladder, they are the ones a few rungs ahead of you. These professionals have an understanding of where you are in your career and how you can get to the next level. “It might be a senior designer; it might be a project manager; it might be a junior designer who you really gain a lot of that insight from,” said another professional. And don’t discount your peers. “I think that a lot of our students get very wrapped up in being in an office with a very specific person. But there are seven other amazing designers that they are in school with who they could learn a lot from, especially after graduation.” It’s important to keep those connections strong post-college.

MENTORSHIPS CAN BE INFORMAL.
“I don’t think [mentoring] has to be that formal,” said a professional in L.A. “Every day is a mentorship opportunity because you are always learning something new. I don’t think it needs to be, on Mondays, I go to lunch with my mentor. It’s never like that.” Keep an open mind: Mentoring can happen in one-on-one meetings, in the hallway at the office, at workplace happy hours, over coffee, or at lunch.

PAY IT FORWARD.
Finding the right mentor might seem paramount to students who have their sights set on their first job out of college. But in a year or two, you’ll have knowledge to share with a new grad. “Don’t forget that in a year from now you will start being someone’s mentor,” advised another professional. “Part of having a mentor is being a mentor to someone else and keeping that cycle going. So I think that that’s really important to keep in mind. Think about who is coming behind you and how you can help.”

“Any client you have, you are selling yourself. You are building a relationship, so sales skills are necessary.”
The International Interior Design Association (IIDA) is the Commercial Interior Design Association with global reach. We support design professionals, industry affiliates, educators, students, firms, and their clients through our network of 15,000+ members across 58 countries.

We advocate for advancements in education, design excellence, legislation, leadership, accreditation, and community outreach to increase the value and understanding of interior design as a profession that enhances business value and positively impacts the health and well-being of people’s lives every day. For more information, please visit www.iida.org.

OFS Brands is a family owned, community-driven company providing socially responsible furniture and logistics solutions in office, healthcare, education, government, and home office markets across the world. Established in 1937 in Huntingburg, Indiana, OFS Brands has grown into a global leader while staying true to its local roots and core values of sustainability and craftsmanship.

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