“Check your cape at the door.

We’re **collaborative**, we’re **teammates**, and we don’t compete with each other — we inspire each other.”

— Jennifer Carzoli, IIDA, senior project manager, Perkins+Will, Chicago
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INTRODUCTION

Students of interior design are entering a robust profession that has evolved as the understanding of the impact of design is becoming more broadly understood. What are student concerns today? What do they need to keep in mind as they transition from school to practice? And what can design professionals learn from a new generation of young people who will soon shape the future of the industry?

IIDA, the commercial interior design association, and OFS Brands hosted a second four-city series of Student Roundtables to glean insights and share knowledge. In addition, all IIDA Student Members were invited to participate in an online survey related to their academic experiences and career aspirations. This report summarizes discussions from the roundtables as well as survey findings.

The Student Roundtable events hosted by IIDA and OFS Brands in Houston, San Jose, San Francisco, and Chicago in late 2017 and early 2018 brought together interior design students and local practitioners to engage in informal discussions on both the current state of the profession and future of design. The inaugural series was held in fall 2016. Reflections from the inaugural roundtables were outlined in the report “The Future of the Industry,” which can be downloaded as a free PDF from iida.org.

The latest series of discussions each attracted 12 to 15 participants with diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Attendees were encouraged to share their experiences and speak openly about what drew them to the design profession, both preparing for and executing a successful transition from academia to practice, and the many roles that designers can play in shaping the built environment and, ultimately, peoples’ lives.

Student roundtable participants included juniors and seniors in undergraduate degree programs as well as several pursuing graduate degrees. They hailed from a broad range of locations — some grew up near the schools of their choice and others were from countries far abroad. Notably, a significant number of student attendees were kick-starting second careers with their design degrees. Along with the students, a select group of influential design professionals attended each roundtable and shared knowledge honed over the courses of their careers.
Why Design?

“Why Did You Choose Interior Design?”

This simple yet complex question was posed by Ryan Ben, student engagement and advancement manager of IIDA, at the beginning of each roundtable discussion.

Many students responded that they were drawn to the profession based on the desire to help others, create inclusive spaces, and positively shape the human experience. The interior design profession tends to attract those who are curious, creative, rational, and empathetic. Interiors provide the backdrop for the majority of our lives, and thoughtfully designed spaces have the potential to elevate the moods and well-being of occupants.

Choosing a career path is a life-defining decision. Some people experience light-bulb moments while many weigh several options in making their choices. Moreover, it’s not uncommon for people to pivot between multiple pursuits. This was the experience of Lisanne Huber, Student IIDA, at West Valley College and a participant in the San Jose, California, roundtable. She had held a variety of jobs including a stint in cosmetology before enrolling in an interior design program.

“What drew me to cosmetology was that I liked giving somebody a new look and seeing how good they felt about themselves, both on the inside and outside,” Huber said. “I’ve finally found a career that I’m passionate about that also enables me to help people and make them feel good just like I did when I gave them a great haircut, style, or color.”

Few professions blend creativity and problem-solving like the practice of interior design – which encompasses aspects of art, science, and psychology. Beyond mastering aesthetics, interior designers must be multitaskers who are well-versed in standards that protect public health, safety, and welfare while keeping the bigger picture in mind. They also coordinate closely with a range of team members, including colleagues, clients, consultants, end users, and members of the public.

Image credit: Isometric Exchange via IIDA.
TESTING THE WATERS

Studio projects in design school invite students to test limits and expand their imaginations — make-believe clients are always agreeable, budgets are infinite, and the laws of gravity don’t necessarily apply. Getting projects built in the real world is infinitely more complex, but constraints can often breed creativity. “It’s really about listening to what the client is saying and then giving them the best design possible based on those parameters,” said Kathy Chauvin, associate principal, Abel Design Group, Houston. “I find I’m very seldom limited creatively.”

Both student and professional attendees agreed that one of the best ways to prepare for practice is to complete an internship before graduation, either during an academic year as part of a school’s curriculum requirements or over a summer break. Internships expose students to real-world experience while providing them with a safety net, allowing them to explore a variety of firm cultures and project typologies.

“When we meet candidates who have completed multiple internships, we know that they have experience with working in different environments and with a range of personalities,” noted Chauvin.
MEETING YOUR MATCH

As interior design students approach graduation, they should contemplate their career goals and seek out firms or companies that align with their personal beliefs and values. Respondents to the IIDA/OFS Brands Student Roundtable Survey cited culture as the most important factor in selecting a company at which to begin their careers, followed by opportunities for creativity and career growth.

“We’ve made a more concerted effort to identify candidates that fit with our firm culture because it’s really important,” said Chauvin. “I’ve worked at places where I got up every morning not wanting to go there, and I never want to feel that way again.”

When evaluating firm culture, students should consider whether it’s a more boutique or corporate environment, as well as the types of projects that the firm specializes in. Is the workplace open and inviting with communal areas that promote interaction? Do staff members seem engaged and passionate about their work? What types of work will a new employee who is a recent graduate be engaged in? Students should also inquire about professional development opportunities and other benefits that will impact the company’s culture.

WHAT FACTORS ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT FOR YOU IN SELECTING A COMPANY TO START YOUR CAREER WITH AS A DESIGNER?

- Company Culture
- Opportunity to Be Creative
- Opportunity for Career Growth
- Location
- Other

When evaluating firm culture, students should consider whether it’s a more boutique or corporate environment, as well as the types of projects that the firm specializes in. Is the workplace open and inviting with communal areas that promote interaction? Do staff members seem engaged and passionate about their work? What types of work will a new employee who is a recent graduate be engaged in? Students should also inquire about professional development opportunities and other benefits that will impact the company’s culture.
Notable Results from IIDA/OFS Student Roundtable Survey

ALL IIDA STUDENT MEMBERS WERE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN AN ONLINE SURVEY FOCUSING ON THEIR ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS.

78%
Most respondents plan to seek employment with professional design firms after graduation. Respondents were allowed to select multiple options, but a clear majority (78 percent) indicated that they would prefer to work for an interior design firm, while 59 percent would consider an interdisciplinary architecture/engineering/design firm. Additionally, nearly 37 percent of respondents would be open to positions within corporate design departments of other organizations.

70%
Students are interested in gaining experience on a variety of project typologies. While the survey allowed respondents to select multiple options, it revealed that the most popular typology, by far, is hospitality design (67 percent), followed by corporate (52 percent), retail (48 percent), residential (34 percent), education (33 percent), and healthcare design (33 percent).

67%
The most important factor for respondents in selecting a firm to work for is its culture (67 percent), followed by opportunities for creativity and career growth. Salary ranked much lower on the list.

28%
Nontraditional students abound: 28 percent of respondents are pursuing their interior design degrees as part of secondary professional career paths.

92%
Precisely 92 percent of respondents believe that their education and professional development experiences have prepared them for entry-level design positions.

67%
Exactly 70 percent of respondents have completed at least one internship and currently identify one or more professional mentors.

78%
When it comes to certification goals, respondents plan to prioritize the National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) certification (92 percent) and LEED accreditation (78 percent), while newer programs like WELL seem to be gaining traction among prospective graduates.

*Statistics are based on results from 252 IIDA Student Members with a response rate of approximately 10 percent.
LEARNING ON THE JOB

Employers do not expect recent graduates to know everything. Reputable firms view new hires as investments, and they help them learn, grow, and prosper. “Saying ‘I don’t know’ is never a wrong answer,” reassured several professionals, emphasizing that emerging designers should never hesitate to ask for help.

However, recent graduates shouldn’t necessarily count on having the opportunity to participate in design right away, but they can advance more quickly by being enthusiastic and taking the initiative to tackle tasks that others might view as mundane.

“Design is an iterative process, and we learn through repetition,” noted Primo Orpilla, FIIDA, principal, Studio O+A in San Francisco.

Creating construction documents and drawing details helps recent graduates learn how things get built, which ultimately makes them stronger designers down the road. “Don’t be afraid to ask for advice and be clear about your goals,” advised David Euscher, IIDA, vice president and interior design studio leader, Corgan in Houston. “But in the end, it’s a team sport.”
EXPLORING PROJECT TYPOLOGIES

Students said that they hope to gain experience across a variety of project types; however, the IIDA/OFS Brands Student Roundtable Survey revealed that the majority of respondents are most interested in hospitality design. Roundtable participants that were attracted to hospitality interiors said that they enjoyed the beauty and creative appeal of hotels, restaurants, lounges, and spas. Other students noted that they are drawn to the typology based on their experience working in the industry and the desire to improve the guest experience.

“We want to design spaces that we can experience personally,” explained Alexander Wilson, a Sam Houston State University student. “If I design a hotel, I can stay there, or invite my family and friends and have them tell me how amazing it is.”

Some students enter interior design programs with particular project focuses in mind, but it’s not uncommon for them to shift priorities as they are exposed to new options. For example, Lorenzo Salazar, Student IIDA, who is a student at San Jose State University, had originally envisioned working for Disney and designing theme parks. He was initially turned off by tenant fit-out and workplace projects, which he correlated with seas of cubicles. However, after visiting a friend who works at Facebook, Salazar had an epiphany: “Oh, this is Disneyland!”

Another student in Houston, Marcia Rodriguez, Student IIDA, from the Art Institute of Houston, found her calling in designing interiors for wellness: “I got to the point where I enjoyed considering the functions of space, data collection, and research — that’s why I veered toward healthcare instead of hospitality, which is more focused on aesthetics.”

Typologies vary in terms of client interaction and duration, and they often require specialized knowledge. However, the executions of many projects are similar, and with increasing overlap — particularly the infusion of hospitality inspired features in many interiors — it’s not difficult for designers to transition between project types.
ALTERNATIVE CAREER PATHS

Although 78 percent of respondents to the IIDA/OFS Brands Student Roundtable Survey indicated that they intend to work for professional interior design firms, many design graduates ultimately choose to pursue careers in related fields in which this background proves to be an asset.

“My interior design degree is invaluable to the conversations that I’m able to have with designers and understanding space, function, and furnishings,” shared Lindsey Craig, OFS Brand representative in Houston.

Interior design graduates can excel in sales positions with manufacturers and furniture dealers, in the design departments of corporations, as well as in other fields such as facility management, education, and art consulting. Some choose to solely design products such as lighting or furniture, and others are able to incorporate product design within a practice that designs interiors.
BECOMING A BETTER DESIGNER

Good designers solve problems, but the most successful designers anticipate clients’ needs before they even perceive them. This ability requires nurturing the client relationship from the beginning and investing in extensive research into their industry, business model, and day-to-day operations.

Jackie Wheat, principal and director of design, PDR in Houston, believes that designers should think like businesspeople: “Talk to clients about their challenges and what they envision for their future, and deliver solutions. Based on our experience, benchmarking, and in-depth research that we’ve completed for other clients, we can unveil biases that they might have as well as things that they haven’t thought about.”
LEGITIMIZING LICENSURE

The National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ) exam is an exam developed and administered by the Council of Interior Design Qualification (CIDQ), and it’s currently the only nationally recognized professional competency exam for interior designers in the U.S. and Canada. However, legislation for professional regulation varies in the U.S. by state, and currently little more than half of the states require NCIDQ certification for practicing interior designers.

“By taking licensing exams, we are not just helping our profession, but we are accepting all the responsibility that goes with it to promote health, safety, and welfare,” said Euscher. “We are demonstrating to the public that we are taking that responsibility seriously just like architects and engineers.”

Many professionals, including San Francisco-based Collin Burry, FIIDA, design principal at Gensler, and Shaw McLean-Bergel, IIDA, who leads her own practice McLean Bergel Design, encouraged students to learn about existing requirements and keep in touch with local legislators to advocate for licensure. Wheat readily accepts the challenge: “It becomes our responsibility to educate the rest of the world about what we are doing and how important it is.”
The work of interior designers carries a responsibility for the creation of spaces that enhance the human experience. Still, the misperception that interior designers are equivalent to decorators is one that professional designers often encounter in conversations with friends, family members, and even others in the industry. Many young students are not aware that interior design is a viable career path since few high schools offer directly relevant courses beyond classes in the arts.

“When I was younger, I wanted to pursue interior design, but my parents didn’t view it as a real job. I studied business and was good at it, but I wasn’t passionate about it,” said Rodriguez. “I think, if my parents were more educated about design, I would have been doing that from the beginning.”

Perceptions of the interior design profession are shifting in a positive way. The design of interior spaces increasingly influences the overall building envelope design and development. And the impact of well-designed interiors — on productivity, wellness, and business outcomes — is more readily and broadly recognized. “More interiors practices are in the position to drive building form from the program inside out,” said Orpilla. “Interior design is becoming more of a science, allowing us to predict behaviors in certain types of settings and better meet the needs of end users.”
Interior design schools encourage students to think creatively and solve problems, but nothing entirely prepares one for the transition between academia and the workplace. Below are several tips and strategies that incorporate proven advice from professionals and students who attended recent roundtables:

**TURN THE TABLES**

Students should be encouraged to be ready to have conversations with design professionals, formally or informally, at any time — don't wait until your school's annual career fair to practice the art of the interview. Remember that it’s a two-way street — students should feel comfortable requesting informal calls or meetings with members of the design industry to learn more about potential career paths. Networking can seem daunting even to those who are seasoned, but students’ requests typically delight professionals, who are often happy to share their experiences and advice.

Target professionals in firms or companies in a variety of sizes, locations, and project specialties. Rather than solely reaching out to design directors and principals — also talk with those that are not in hiring positions, and those in intermediate and nontraditional roles. Another insider tip is to befriend sales representatives, who often have valuable insight into many firms' cultures as well as the connections to help you get in the door.

When conducting an informal interview, ask questions such as: “Which qualities does your firm value among new graduates?” “What aspects of your job do you enjoy the most (or the least)?” “What’s a typical day like for you inside (or outside) of the office?” These conversations will help you focus your career goals, and an added benefit is that you will likely bond with a mentor, or several.

**PARTICIPATE IN PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Professional organizations like IIDA offer student memberships that provide many benefits, including annual design competitions, special programs at NeoCon like design charettes, invitations to events hosted by local IIDA chapters, and subscriptions to industry newsletters and publications. The IIDA Student Mentorship Program pairs more than 1,000 students and professionals across the country based on location. The program draws students out of classrooms and into the real world for a day of job shadowing with their mentors, who include interior design professionals, manufacturer representatives, dealers, and educators. IIDA also facilitates many other informal mentoring opportunities for student members.
CULTIVATE OUTSIDE INTERESTS

Studio-centered design curriculums are known for their intensity, which forges lifelong bonds between classmates. However, it’s essential to get outside of the studio occasionally in order to become more well-rounded as a person. Take courses in other topics such as business, finance, human resources, math, art, psychology, urban planning, or public speaking. Keeping up with a broad range of news is important — the business of design is impacted by the economy, shifts in demographics, and a myriad of other factors. Join clubs, pursue hobbies, and read a variety of books and magazines. You might discover new passions that will ultimately enhance your abilities as a designer.

“You can be an excellent designer, but you need to be a great storyteller” — Arturo Febry, IIDA, principal and design director, IA Interior Architects, Chicago

PRACTICE EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS

At nearly every roundtable event, professionals agreed that public speaking skills are essential for successful interior designers. Emerging professionals are being placed in client-facing positions sooner than ever before, and they must learn to speak comfortably, confidently, and intelligently. Thankfully, these skills significantly improve through practice — presentations and critiques in school are a good place to start honing them.

At the San Jose roundtable, Lisa Macaluso, IIDA, principal at the HGA Architects and Engineers office in San Jose, said, “Visual presentation is important, but the most important part is how you tell the story verbally.” A lack of public speaking skills can even limit career growth and opportunities for promotions. “You must not only be able to explain your design,” Macaluso said, “But you also have to sell it effectively — and that comes more naturally when you are passionate and excited about what you do.”
DESIGNING WITH EMPATHY

PROFESSIONALS CONSISTENTLY EMPHASIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF PEOPLE SKILLS — DESIGNERS MUST BE STRONG COMMUNICATORS AND ENGAGING STORYTELLERS WHILE EXHIBITING AN EMPATHETIC APPROACH TO DESIGN. HERE ARE A FEW SUGGESTIONS:

Thoroughly research new or potential clients to understand their mission, culture, and vision.

Establish genuine connections with team members by being authentic and respectful.

Anticipate clients’ needs and consider how design can provide measurable solutions (for example, boosting employee retention and morale while reducing sick days).

Develop a narrative around your design by identifying challenges and explaining how you’ve addressed them — in plain language, skipping design jargon.

Be honest with clients about how limitations, such as budgets and schedules, can affect the outcome of a project.

Hone your sketching skills so you can quickly communicate ideas in a way that feels more personal and engaging, rather than solely presenting polished renderings.

“One important aspect in client relations is spending enough time in the beginning. You have to nurture relationships.” — Kimshasa Baldwin, principal, Deture Culsign, Chicago
CONCLUSION

Throughout the roundtable events, professional interior designers expressed candid surprise that they’re not approached more by recent graduates wanting to have a brief meeting to talk about their career paths, firms they have worked for, and experiences in the industry. Moreover, professionals emphasized their willingness to mentor graduates with the knowledge they’ve gained.

Interior design is about making the human experience the primary focus. Students gain critical technical experience through classes and projects, but sometimes don’t fully consider the human element that’s intricately tied to interior design. Despite the prevalent thinking among students with short resumes and recent graduation dates, the interior design community thrives when peer-to-peer industry knowledge is shared. Professionals want to bring the human-first approach that they implement in the design process to the mentoring process, reinforcing a sense of community not only in design but in practice.
IIDA

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. www.iida.org

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