Today’s forward-thinking Interior Design schools are evolving to ensure graduates come armed with a knowledge base that encompasses the entire practice of design, including marketing, management, financial and communication skills.

For many Interior Design students and recent graduates, times are undeniably tough. Thanks to ugly economic realities, entry-level jobs and even internships aren’t easy to come by. And for those fortunate enough to find work as Interior Designers upon graduation, they’re expected to hit the ground running.

The silver lining is the response of Interior Design programs at colleges and universities across the globe. Programs are evolving to better meet the needs of Interior Design firms, and enhance the level of professionalism for students and graduates. Through formal and informal collaborations with other departments and design firms, programs are ensuring graduates gain a comprehensive skill set that encompasses the entire practice of design, including business, marketing and communication skills.

Perspective spoke with several well-respected educators from across North America to find out how their programs ensure graduates are ready for the real world of Interior Design.

all the right pieces
How do you define your role as an Interior Design educator?

Amy Dahm: As an educator, my approach is to set up the structure for a balance between focused academic work — exploration of ideas, research, guided mentoring, building essential skill sets — and exposure to practice — students working with design professionals throughout the design process, field trips, formal critiques.

Andrew Furman: One of the things I see my role being: someone who tries to enable conversations. At Ryerson we always are having these interesting conversations about “Interior Design plus what?” It’s always this wonderful moving target. [Interior Design] is one of the most interesting places to work as an educator because you have so many great collaborations and conversations with other educators and other collaborators. These collaborations and conversations are both structured and informal. There’s a formal structure in curriculum, but I think the real magic happens when you just allow things to happen.

What about the more formal side of collaboration? What formal partnerships do you engage in with other departments?

Crandon Gustafson: One of our most fruitful collaborations is between the Interior Design department and the communication design program that we began here [at Harrington College of Design] four years ago. One example of a project [Interior Design and communication design] students worked on together was a display at NeoCon. It was a real-life project because they were given a budget, they had a schedule and they worked with a contractor to get the project built.

The awareness of brand that the communication design students bring really helps our Interior Design students. The idea of a company or an organization’s brand being expressed in a three-dimensional space is something that gets talked about a lot, but when our students work together with graphic designers, they develop a common language about what that is and how to make it happen in a space.

Pamela Evans: The Interior Design program at Kent State University has always been multidisciplinary. We’ve long collaborated with architecture, business, visual communications, art and technology. Our students take construction technology classes, where they learn alongside tech students. They take courses in visual communications and business. We’ve built these courses into the curriculum. It is key for students to understand that, as practitioners, they’ll work not just with other designers but with all types of professionals and individuals on projects.

What collaborative relationships do you maintain with Interior Design firms?

Gustafson: One example of collaboration with the profession is one we organized last year with Perkins Eastman, an architectural firm that designs senior living facilities. They enlisted one of our graduate classes in an awareness-raising effort with the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging (AAHSA), where they ran a competition to design and build a model “aging in place” apartment. Perkins Eastman and Catholic Charities actually funded the construction of two of these model apartments for the AAHSA conference in Chicago. It brought new ideas to that industry, the architectural firm got kudos and our students got recognition.

Evans: Beyond working with firms in our internship program, firms are now starting to come to us and ask for help with research for their projects. Firms have involved our students in data gathering activities — online research, observational research, preliminary design work. Both students and firms gain from this type of experience.

Dahm: Some of our studios partner with local design firms for specific school projects. For these projects, students are critiqued by designers specializing in the project type. Students are especially attentive when up-to-date, relevant feedback from “real” designers is provided.

How do you stay on top of changing business needs and skills required by design firms?

Dahm: Tenure track professors must practice “scholarship,” which can range from producing research to continuing design practice. My scholarship focuses on connecting design practice with design education through web-based video. Much of my time outside of class is spent videotaping design professionals around the country, a great way to stay in touch with the needs of practice. The videos of designers talking about their work are free and accessible to anyone on my website, projectconnectdpe.org.

Evans: Whenever we bring in alumni and other practitioners to juror projects or for internship reviews, we always try to do a de-briefing at the end to get their candid opinion of how the program is doing and where it can improve. The biggest thing is asking, “what do we [as an Interior Design program] need to do?” For example, at the senior reviews, I’ll sit with our alumni and other jurors over the lunch break, have a very candid discussion and take notes.
How else do your schools integrate communication, business, management and marketing skills—all of which are encompassed in the practice of Interior Design?

**Furman**
We’re really trying to work toward the work-study co-op within the curriculum. A work-study project that students recently worked on is the industrial production of a recycling bin container for a client. The client told the students, “The stuff you can get from catalogues isn’t really appealing to us. We’re looking for something you could design and solve the problem for us.”

The students made two prototypes, and there was some interest in both to actually realize them, so they’re being put into production.

It’s a reality-based project that gives students the experience of having a real client that they visit, and having the client coming in for critiques and design discussions. Students quickly realize how much is part of the design process. They learn to deal with clients, budgets and all the hiccups that happen in the course of realizing a project.

**Evans**
In our fourth year, we use a team approach to projects, where someone is the project manager and they work with team members. We teach project management and leadership skills early on, but students are given the chance to apply them during their senior year. Students have the opportunity to manage a project, create time reports and manage different work styles. They experience what it’s like to work in a firm.

Time to get out your educator crystal ball. Will the need for increased professionalism in Interior Design continue to grow over the next few years?

**Evans**
The bar is always going to be raised. There will be a greater need in the future for our profession to communicate how we affect the quality of life and the things we do extremely well that no one else can do. We have to capture that and put it on the forefront.

Every student of Interior Design and every educator needs to learn to say, “This is what we bring to the table. These are the skills no one else has.”

**Furman**
With Interior Design, there is some misinformation out there. We’ve gotten a lot of press through entertainment and all these other things. Anything is great to get your name out there, but we have to do more education with the public.

**Gustafson**
As educators, we’re the perfect model for our students in terms of talking to the public about what designers do. As a teacher, you need to present an idea that’s new to a student, but you always have to do it using things they already know. An example is the pomelo, a fruit not widely known. When you say it’s a grapefruit inside, it’s shaped like an oversized pear and it has a really thick rind, suddenly your listener has a very clear picture.

Likewise, our students need to talk to clients and the public about something they don’t necessarily know. If we, as teachers, think hard about how we present new information to students, we can be a model for how they can express to the public and clients the value of Interior Design.

THE RENAISSANCE DESIGNER

What do advanced degrees in business, management and marketing have to do with Interior Design? Plenty, according to some very successful, big picture-minded designers.

Ask any qualified professional Interior Designer, and they’ll tell you the same. The practice of Interior Design extends far beyond choosing color swatches and selecting tiles. But few designers realize the extent of all that encompasses the business side of design.

*Interior Designer, and they’ll tell you the same: What do advanced degrees in business, management and marketing have to do with Interior Design? Plenty, according to some very successful, big picture-minded designers.*

**Graham**
A major part of being an Interior Designer is understanding how the business side of design impacts the business side of our clients and the end product,” says Graham, Director of M Moser Associates in New York.

With this notion, Graham enrolled in an MBA program at New York University as a young Interior Designer in the early ‘90s. After the stock market crash of 1987, she realized that an MBA — combined with her design degree — would demonstrate her credibility and ability to see the bigger picture of Interior Design.

Earning an MBA in management not only helped Graham garner respect among clients, but also helped her hone her project cost analysis, project management, presentation and other business skills.

**Bryant**
Interior Designers with MBAs may not yet be the norm. Still, a good number of designers are opting for degrees in business, management, marketing and other relevant fields for professional development and personal growth.

**Sakhi**
As Director of Interior Design at M Moser Associates in Columbus, Ohio, “Design is a service. Not only are you branding your clients’ environments, but your work is a brand, and you have to know how to market yourself to the public.”

In her undergrad marketing classes, Bryant studied different demographics and market sectors, and learned to better communicate with and present to clients. Today, she’s putting her business knowledge to good use in the commercial design projects on which she works. “If you can relate your ideas to clients with an understanding of their business sense, it helps clients see them in a different light,” she says.

**Furman**
Earning my MBA has changed the way I approach projects financially,” she says. “In design schools, we are not necessarily taught that budget is as much an issue as creativity. But the business world says budget is the No. 1 priority.”

As an Interior Design major at Bowling Green State University, Molly Bryant, IDA, opted to complement her Interior Design education with a minor in marketing. “(Interior Design and marketing) go hand in hand,” says Bryant, now an Interior Design Associate at M Moser Associates Architecture in Columbus, Ohio. “Design is a service. Not only are you branding clients’ environments, but your work is a brand, and you have to know how to market yourself to the public.”

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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

Of course, going back to school isn’t a feasible option for all designers. But that doesn’t diminish the fact that designers at all points in their careers should work to raise their level of business professionalism, Graham says.

“It’s important for all involved to understand the business of design, not just those leading the design,” says Graham. Helping designers raise their level of business professionalism is a guiding principle behind Graham’s LMNQI’s professional development and networking organization for the A&D community. The group may have been founded to assist out-of-work designers, but today a growing number of employed designers take advantage of LMNNP’s workshops and events to enhance their professionalism.

“A lot of designers are missing that business of design focus,” Graham says. “Even if you don’t get an MBA, at least get exposed to some of those elements.”

**Graham**
As Director of Interior Design at the Apollo Group Inc. in Phoenix, Sakhi was tasked with designing facilities in countries all across the globe. She closely focused her MBA work on international design, and based her thesis on designing sustainable work environments in other countries.

Graduate school taught Sakhi to better conduct research and demonstrate design ROI, as well as gave her a working knowledge of complex international business laws. “Earning my MBA has changed the way I approach projects financially,” she says. “In