Design: the next generation

Educators from three top design schools weigh in on what designers must know about today's students.

By Michelle Bowles
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IF YOU COULD LOOK INTO A CRYSTAL BALL and see what's in store for your career, would you? While design educators likely don’t have crystal balls, Tarot cards or other psychic tools, they can offer a glimpse at the next generation of designers – today’s design students. Forward-thinking designers realize the importance of understanding their future peers, co-workers and even competition.

*Perspective* sat down with three veteran professors from some of the top design schools in the United States to find out what designers should know about these students – their work habits, ethics and personalities – as well as how the future generation of designers is poised to shake the industry.

**Q:** What are the defining characteristics of today’s students that current designers need to know?

**Beverly Brandt:** Today’s students are deadly serious. As the post-9/11 generation, that’s one of the things I’ve found that’s really important. They’re also overburdened and over-committed. We still have lots of students who are married with children. And some are in the “sandwich generation,” where they have aging parents that they’re dealing with as they’re raising children. Most of them work – anywhere from 10 to 40 hours a week. And they’re trying to fit their degree in around that.

They’re definitely on a 24/7 schedule, and they expect the same from faculty. They probably would expect the people that they work for to be working around the clock.

So many of them are paying for their degrees. They want to know how everything is going to fit together. They want to be sure that everything they’re doing will tie into making them the professionals they want to be.

**Paul Eshelman:** A degree of selling still needs to be done to these future practitioners. Although they are already invested in the choice they still need confirmation that they have made a good career choice and that each has found a productive way to spend her or his life.

In terms of shaping forces, 9/11 certainly is a powerful one. But these people do not appear to be daunted by this event. I think they remain optimistic. I was talking with a few of our interior design students prior to this interview...
and was reminded that they’re risk-takers. They know how to keep focused on the possibilities, not limitations. Most importantly, though, they know how to have fun.

They’re ambitious, but they’re still young. They don’t want people telling them that they can’t do something. They don’t want to be discouraged; they want to be encouraged.

**Q:** How do technology and the media influence today’s generation of students?

**Mary Ann R. Potter:** They are very much aware of design due to the media, and in large part, to the emphasis of all the things that are designed.

**Brandt:** They’re so media-savvy. When we get them as freshmen, what they know about interior design is what they’ve seen on cable TV. They’ve exposed to the concept of decoration. Then, they enter our courses, and within a couple of years, they redefine what they thought the profession was. And they begin to understand its tie with architecture, life-safety issues and issues pertaining to building codes. They go from thinking of it as something “fun” and “fluffy,” to realizing that it’s a very serious profession that requires specialized skills and abilities.

**Eshelman:** In terms of technology, everything is instant for these students. They instant message each other. They’re available to one another 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They’re used to instant access to information over the Internet. This immediacy in communication makes them different from students of 10 years ago.

Just five years ago, in basic design studio, students were preparing hand-drawn presentation boards. Almost overnight, presentation boards went from hand-drawn to CAD and computer-generated. There was an exponential leap in the visual richness of the presentations, but not necessarily in understanding of design and composition. We, as faculty, still have to push these students into hand skills and free-hand sketching. We have to work at drawing this new generation – to the extent that is possible – out of its “virtual” [world].

**Brandt:** Because [these students were] born with a mouse in their hand and are always tied-in to the Internet, they’re much more globally aware. They may not have traveled as much, but they’re very aware of the world – and so much of that is “virtually.”

**Potter:** Students are discovering that the computer allows them to work away from a studio and work on assignments any time they choose. When they enter the workplace, this will surely strengthen the trend for designers to use technology to work away from the office, whether at home or some other place, and to adjust their work hours to suit their preferred work style.

For years now, designers have been creating spaces to allow other careers to do that. Now, they’re going to feel the need to do that for themselves.
Q: You’ve all at some point deemed this group of students “the 9/11 generation.” What will this mean for them entering the workplace?

Brandt: I noticed immediately following 9/11 that issues of security and life safety in interior design became extraordinarily important to students. If they didn’t want to pay attention in a class that dealt with access, egress, and fire and building codes, when they saw the World Trade Center burning, they understood. That may have changed their attitudes toward architecture. Here, we’ve always had the sort of dichotomy of architecture as this permanent art, and interior design as something more ephemeral. But when you see two of the largest buildings in the world crumble like that, you begin to realize that, to a degree, everything is ephemeral. They’re very aware of their responsibilities to their clients — helping them feel secure and making sure the interior functions for them.

Eshelman: One overlying idea that has emerged from 9/11 is caring for people, caring about people. 9/11 helped punctuate that mindset for this generation of students. I think we certainly reinforce that wherever we can in the classroom or in the design studio.

Potter: They also are more aware of environmental and social responsibility. They learn more about it as they progress through their coursework and accept the challenge of that endeavor.

Q: What would you tell design firms — current designers — to expect from your students?

Brandt: They’re hard-working multi-taskers who are used to deadlines. They’re definitely used to doing things in groups, so that’s something employers could build upon, in terms of putting them on team projects.

If anything, employers should know this group values flexibility. I remember reading a statistic a few years ago about how the average person graduating will probably have eight to 10 career changes in his or her life. In addition to thinking about moving from company to company to get a variety of different experiences, many of our students are thinking about graduate school to make them even more marketable.

Eshelman: For this group of students, career flexibility is important. In a field that is predominantly women, they want to have complete lives, inclusive of family and career.

But above all, they are looking for meaningful engagement. If they find themselves in a situation where they’re being taken advantage of or do not feel they are fully applying their abilities, they’re going to move on. This expectation frames part of the challenge for employers. Employers must mentor these new practitioners with work that provides a positive learning experience.

Potter: With their knowledge, skills and technology, future designers will be designing, researching,
communicating and presenting faster and more efficiently, resulting in faster turnaround time.

Q: How can employers ensure meaningful engagement for these new designers?

Eshelman: Students’ expectations are set in school; they expect full engagement of their talents. Upon getting their first job, they can be disappointed if they feel they are not being fully engaged. An example is the person who’s stuck behind the computer because they happen to be the one with the technology capability.

Brandt: Mentoring programs are important. We try to bring back ex-students as mentors to help students through college. Whether they’ve only been out a year or two or they’ve been working for five or 10 years, we like to bring them back as much as possible, so that they feel they’re playing a part in the education of the next generation. They’re not only making a difference to their clients and to the companies they work for, but also the institution from which they graduated.

Eshelman: We constantly employ the scaffolding educational theory, where you support the learner at the outer edges of their current abilities, and then as those abilities change, the nature of the scaffolding changes accordingly. If employers are really mindful of it, they can be more proactive in the scaffolding of new employees. By supporting these new designers, they can ensure that whatever they’re engaging in, they will succeed, grow from that success and develop more confidence.

Potter: Certainly, employing firms should provide mentoring and all the typical rewards systems, but they must go further. Designers should receive higher financial compensation and financial support for active involvement in professional organizations and endeavors related to certification examinations.

Q: What areas of design most interest your students?

Brandt: “Sustainable design” is the phrase I see when I’m reading answers to essay questions and term papers. Today’s students are very interested in new materials that are environmentally friendly. They’re quality, not quantity, oriented. They are function-first oriented.

Our students also are commercially oriented. Once they start learning about hospitality, healthcare, office and retail environments, that’s where they get really excited.

Potter: In terms of sustainable design, the more they learn, the more they realize its importance in their design work and for their own personal lives in the future. They want to know about technology, whether it’s the use of new products or new approaches to design. There doesn’t seem to be interest in the quirky design trends of the moment. They’re interested in the real solid design issues.