EMPOWERING DESIGN

Educating the Future Design
Professional with Enhanced Focus
on Culture, People, and Research

IIDA25   *Milliken*

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pictured on the cover:
Jon Otis, IIDA (top left),
Michelle Pearson, Ph.D. (center large), with student.
Lower Right Cover Photograph Courtesy of Texas Tech University

To empower the design profession, educators and practitioners must embrace increasing diversity, expand established modes of thought, and champion education and research as invaluable, interlinked components. That was the primary outcome of an invigorating dialogue between educators, practitioners, and students from across the country at the 2019 IIDA Educators Roundtable. Presented by IIDA and hosted by Milliken at its Roger Milliken Campus in Spartanburg, South Carolina, the two-day event in March 2019 engaged participants in a series of lively, in-depth discussions on how best to equip the next generation of designers for success.

Michelle Pearson, Ph.D. / Darris James, IIDA /
Virginia San Fratello

Photograph Courtesy of David Schmitz Photography

What knowledge and tools do emerging designers need to excel and enrich the profession as a whole?

Over the course of the roundtable, moderated by IIDA Deputy Director and Senior Vice President John Czarnecki, Hon. IIDA, Assoc. AIA, 10 educators/practitioners, four practitioners, and three students shared experiences and brainstormed ideas for how all members of the design community can collaboratively support today's students. Their insights hinged on a critical factor: the next generation of designers will be increasingly diverse. "In a global context, as travel, communication, and the means of conducting business have become easier internationally, the education of the future design professional has to accommodate a broader scope and context," said Czarnecki.

In terms of demographics, today's interior design students differ dramatically from students of past decades, who have typically been young, white, middle-class, and American. From coast to coast, schools today report extraordinary diversity within their student populations, which increasingly comprise international, first-generation, and older second-career or otherwise non-traditional students.

For example, according to the representative educators that attended this roundtable from each school, the interior design programs at Pratt Institute in New York and California College of the Arts (CCA) in San Francisco boast large international populations, with roughly 75 percent of students at both schools hailing from Asian countries—primarily China, but also Korea, India, and Taiwan as well as Latin and South America and Europe. At Texas Tech University (TTU) in Lubbock, Texas, international students, mainly from Iran, make up approximately 60 percent of the graduate interior design student body. First-generation college students comprise 42 percent of those studying interior design at Western Carolina University (WCU) in Cullowhee, North Carolina, and 25 percent of students at University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). Likewise, a 2017 IIDA Student Member survey logged 28 percent of respondents as embarking on their second career. The high numbers of international, first-generation, and non-traditional students reveal that, for interior design programs, there is no longer a "standard" student type. Yet, while diversity abounds, many schools still proceed as though their students arrive with a shared baseline of culture, language, and life experience, as was expected of the more homogenous student populations of years past.

Today, forward-thinking educators strive to support this broad mixture of students who share similar challenges. International students regularly struggle with language and communication difficulties as well as cultural and social expectations.

For first-generation students, who may lack exposure to the conventional lingo and customs that accompany higher education, college can feel equally foreign. Likewise, non-traditional students, who are typically older than their classmates, frequently juggle extracurricular obligations, such as children, partners, and/or jobs. In short, these students all face a host of issues that impact their education and, consequently, their future success as designers.

To advance the profession in line with changing student demographics, schools and educators must rethink the way they support international, first-generation, and non-traditional students, who together count for a large percentage of emerging designers. Drawing from their own classroom- and studio-based experiences, roundtable participants united around this topic, highlighting critical aspects of the educational experience that can empower emerging designers, those who educate them, and the profession as a whole.

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> – Liset Robinson, IIDA

Opposite Page: John Czarnecki, Hon. IIDA, Assoc. AIA

BIG CONVERSATIONS

At all levels, from the institution to the department to the classroom, a lack of adequate and clear communication is a major issue the educators noted. For example, at Pratt Institute, where about three-quarters of the interior design students are from Asian countries, the faculty has not had meaningful discussions on the ramifications of teaching primarily foreign students who are not likely to stay in this country long after graduating, according to Jon Otis, IIDA, who is a professor of practice at Pratt, founder and principal of the multidisciplinary design studio Object Agency (OIA), and currently a vice president on the IIDA International Board of Directors. Schools need to initiate conversations across and within departments about demographic shifts and the resulting impacts, for both the students and the institutions themselves.

> "We talk a lot about teaching methods that engage different language skills and a diverse range of methodologies for communicating design ideas. This is essential design learning, regardless of the student body."
> – Amy Campos, IIDA

What initiatives are in place to support international students? Colleges and universities often have resources akin to Pratt's Office of International Affairs or the CCA's International Student Affairs and Programs Office, which assist students with cultural, social, and educational transitions. Yet, the mere existence of such programs may not be enough. Schools must ask: how valuable are these initiatives for the students they serve? What can be done to make them more effective?

Armed with faculty and student feedback, forward-thinking administrators initiate such discussions on a regular basis, reaching beyond departmental silos to develop collaborative initiatives that support their diverse student populations. While a portion of administrators consciously cultivate such conversations, the roundtable educators noted that some do not. For the health of those institutions and the profession at large, this needs to change.

RETHINKING THE CLASSROOM

Similarly, educators must question assumptions about what their incoming students know and how they, as instructors, can best build on this experience. In other words, "Educators have to completely change the way they teach," said Liset Robinson, IIDA, associate chair of interior design at Savannah School of Art and Design (SCAD) in Atlanta. "Educators have to review fundamentals, terminology, and methodology for students who have received their education from other countries. This allows them to work off of the same page and then fly." While Robinson refers to international students, her comment applies to all students. Within the classroom, the creation of a common language establishes a foundation for everyone to succeed.

Hepi Wachter with students

Utilizing different methods of communication:

To reach a broad range of students, leading educators constantly evolve the way they teach by exploring multiple teaching approaches. "Working with a global population gives educators the opportunity to practice explaining ideas, whether verbally or visually or otherwise, in many different ways," said Amy Campos, IIDA, associate professor and chair of interior design at CCA, and founder and principal of interdisciplinary design practice ACA. "We talk a lot about teaching methods that engage different language skills and a diverse range of methodologies for communicating design ideas. This is essential design learning, regardless of the student body."

Experimentation with methods of communication filter into assignments as well. Some educators encourage students to experiment with alternative modes of communication, such as creating podcasts, which allow them to work on language and storytelling skills, both key components of successful design careers. Others, such as Robinson, include checkpoints in every assignment. This straight-forward step helps students understand what is required of them and allows them to learn throughout the process without misunderstandings hurting their grade.

Encouraging local exploration:

Too often, design students trace a well-worn path between home and school, with little deviation to discover life outside of the campus. This limited repertoire hampers students' chances to learn from and connect with their surrounding culture. Ying (Crystal) Cheng, a student from China completing her senior year at CCA, noted, "One of the biggest difficulties as an international student is the lack of knowledge about the neighborhood, community, and society in which we are living. Interior design programs can provide opportunities for field trips, events, or volunteer activities to help us build more local connections." Aside from exposing students to their immediate environment, site visits foster student-bonding experiences and expand the wealth of material from which students can draw for projects. One cannot design for the world if they are not of the world.

Teaching time management:

Educators such as Jane Hughes, IDEC, assistant professor of interior design at WCU, work hard to instill the importance of time management in their students. Hughes's strategy: "I run my senior-level studios like I ran my firm. For example, we have Monday morning meetings, regular mid-week assessments, and they plot their own timelines for scheduling when certain processes will be complete and adhere to their timeline to assure the project is done on time. I have found that this approach really helps our students be prepared for the workplace."

Other educators have students estimate the time a project will take, track their working hours, and then compare the two figures, helping them acquire a clearer sense of actual time required for various tasks. Still, other teachers emphasize work quality as opposed to quantity, pressing students to hone storytelling abilities by limiting the number of drawings displayed at pin-ups. Indeed, despite the cliché of studio all-nighters, many educators discourage this practice.

After all, the ability to work efficiently is of upmost importance in the workplace, where billable hours and work-life balance come into play.

Connecting with practitioners:

Educators emphasize the benefits of internships, which expose students to the business and practice of design. Yet, in addition to internships—which are not equally available to all students, depending on location, school requirements, or other reasons—educators advocate other kinds of meaningful immersion, such as field trips to practitioners' offices. Hepi Wachter, IDEC president, professor and chair of the College of Visual Arts and Design at the University of North Texas, emphasized the importance of cultivating relationships between students and practitioners. "As design educators, we are role models, and that is the most powerful tool that we have in our box. We should take students out to firms, introduce them, be door openers. We have to create a culture where constant contact with the design communities in which we teach is seen by the students as a normality."

Aside from exposing emerging designers to professionalism in action, regular interaction with firms fosters strong connections between education and practice, smooths students' transitions from school to the workplace, and models a continuing investment in education, even after designers have left the classroom.

GLOBAL MINDSET

Educators noted that, at many schools, the composition of interior design faculty is not nearly as diverse as the student populations they teach. A concentrated effort must be made across interior design programs to hire ethnically and culturally diverse educators, especially those who mirror institutions' individual demographics. "Something we actively discuss when hiring faculty is finding relevant role models for the student body, and making sure that we have a diverse faculty make up and output," says Campos. "That means we consider role models—people who look like them, share their background, and to whom they can relate—and increasing faculty diversity will no doubt help address this issue.

Coupled with the need to address faculty diversity, a school's curriculum may not fully relate to the diverse backgrounds of its student body. Schools can also encourage existing faculty to broaden their cultural horizons in terms of course content. In general, interior design education privileges a Western view,

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applicants' personal profiles as well as the types of work that they do and the way that they teach in the classroom." It can be difficult for students to find focused on typically white European and American designers. "In today's world, we are multicultural and yet we teach design as if it is not," said Otis. "We must begin to acknowledge that a view of design through a homogenous Western lens is a narrow and somewhat elitist perspective. Many educators acknowledge that the academic pedagogy has remained fairly consistent in its exclusivity, save for the introduction of new technology and sustainability concerns. When the content of our studio and theory courses changes to include non-Western references and ideology, then we'll be more accurately addressing the cultural diversity of the current student population."

Otis's point—that educators must consciously incorporate non-Western content into courses—raises the related difficulty of *how* this material is introduced to students. When educators reach beyond the usual canon to include work from Asia, Africa, or South America, for example, the non-Western content is often presented as "other," not by virtue of ill intent, but by being tacked on to the "normal" lessons. At the heart of this problem is a simple fact: educators recognize the value of offering a more global perspective, yet to do so they must often teach unfamiliar content. Some educators embark on self-learning jaunts, but for most, this can be a daunting and time-consuming task.

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In the past decade, architectural history professors addressed a similar challenge by forming the Global Architectural History Teaching Collaborative (GAHTC). Funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and connected with MIT University, the GAHTC boasts a clear mission: "to provide cross-disciplinary, teacher-to-teacher exchanges of ideas and material, in order to energize and promote the teaching of all periods of global architectural history." To accomplish this, GAHTC members—mainly architectural history professors—create and share, free of cost, teaching material that covers non-Western subjects. This organization offers a model for how interior design educators could work together to overcome the difficulties associated with expanding their curricula's global breadth.

Another way to cultivate a global mindset in the classroom involves the students themselves. Educators can encourage students to share their cultures and interests, allowing their colleagues exposure to different beliefs and aesthetics. This can be accomplished in more formal ways, including project assignments that ask students to elaborate on elements of their backgrounds, or in a less structured fashion, such as open conversations. The ability to express one's unique qualities and appreciate others' singular contributions will prove endlessly beneficial for students as they transition to the workplace and regularly interact with other designers, clients, and consultants.

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

Professionalism encompasses a combination of hard skills and specialized knowledge, educators noted, as well as soft skills such as self-regulation and competence. Soft skills may be hard to measure, but they are nonetheless vital for an emerging designer's success. As director of strategic projects at Gensler, Darris James, IIDA, a senior associate at the firm's Washington, D.C. office, spearheads initiatives to strengthen the skills, knowledge, and leadership abilities of the firm's employees worldwide. When asked what Gensler looks for in its new hires, soft skills—namely emotional intelligence—tops James's list. "Emotional intelligence is absolutely critical, especially for today's early career professionals, who by virtue of their generation spend much of their time on social media," said James. "The ability to cultivate relationships with people, have some level of self-awareness and social awareness, and be able to manage emotions and relationships are fundamental skills designers must learn before they go into the workforce."

Felice Silverman, FIIDA / Virginia San Fratello

Why does emotional intelligence matter? As James underscored, "Design is a team sport. Other than your projects in school, you will never be designing by yourself. Even if you have your own design firm, you are going

"Emotional intelligence is absolutely critical, especially for today's early career professionals."

– Darris James, IIDA

to be working with clients. You are going to be working with consultants. You are going to be working with other people." To familiarize students with collaborative interactions, educators build team projects into their

courses, often despite students' preference to work alone. Forward-thinking educators recognize that, for emerging designers, learning to navigate group dynamics is critically important for success.

DESIGN RESEARCH

As evidence-based design expands beyond the realm of healthcare to inform all project types, from workplaces and schools to hotels and restaurants, designers and educational institutions are increasingly prioritizing design research. Michelle Pearson, Ph.D., assistant professor in the department of design at TTU, asserts that exposure to design research is a must for graduate and undergraduate students. "Design is a human-based discipline, and research can help students gain a greater understanding of the 'why' behind human response," Pearson said. "Design problems are often complex and evidence-based research provides students and designers a way to create an educated solution. The role of research

continues to grow in importance because it provides an understanding to the human–environment relationship that drives the field of interior design."

The hard numbers and astute insights produced by design research not only guide the creation of impactful interior environments; they also underscore the value of the interior design profession as a whole. As Ana Pinto-Alexander, IIDA, principal of HKS in Dallas, noted, "The majority of human experience takes place in the interior built environment, where we spend an average of 93 percent of our time. Research shows that an integrated design approach that touches all of the senses improves healing, learning, working, and living outcomes."

As design research becomes a more wide-spread industry resource, emerging designers must be able to interpret and apply the lessons learned from research by others. Thus, "the translational element of research, taking research findings and explaining them so designers or a lay audience can use them, is an aspect in design research to which we really need to pay close attention," said Katherine S. Ankerson, IIDA, AIA, dean of the College of Architecture at University of Nebraska-Lincoln. "This makes the difference between having the research in language that few understand versus translating it to where a population can actually use it."

Likewise, as firms like Gensler, HKS, and others increasingly focus on research-based practices, these offices will seek out designers who are well-versed in design research—who think like researchers, can undertake research projects, and translate their findings into actionable results. With this in mind, fostering design research in interior design programs becomes especially relevant. Pearson asserts, "I would like to see undergraduate students in interior design exposed to research earlier, exploring question such as 'What is research?' and 'How do you distinguish the quality of the research?' This needs to happen on day one."

Amy Campos, IIDA / Shelly Gregg

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TOMORROW'S EDUCATORS

In response to demographic shifts, top educators are evolving their teaching approaches to empower today's emerging designers, who are comprised by a large portion of international, first-generation, and non-traditional students. Yet, the profession's perpetuation hinges not only on its emerging designers, but on the next cohort of educators—those who will teach future generations of designers.

"We have a huge issue in education: there is a shortage of well-qualified educators," said Pamela K. Evans, Ph.D., IIDA, FIDEC, who recently retired as the director of interior design at the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University. "And, in the next 10 to 15 years, this shortage will get worse."

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Two distinct elements contribute to this issue. First, as established educators reach retirement age, there are fewer mid-career candidates available to fill these voids. Second, due to the recent decrease in U.S. birthrates, many colleges will suffer at least a 15 percent decrease in enrollment beginning in the mid-2020s, according to recent demographic studies. Despite the current influx of international students, a decline of student totals overall, and ultimately fewer emerging designers, is expected with a resulting reduced pool of possible design educators.

To counter this pending shortage of educators, students must be exposed to design education as a viable career path. Educators can share their stories about how they came to teach and consciously mentor students who show an aptitude for teaching. Firm leaders can encourage educators/practitioners by making allowances for time spent away from the office in educational settings. This flexibility supports the practice of teaching, forges connections between firms and design schools, and signals that the profession as a whole values education and the advances that it brings.

And all members of the design community must promote awareness about the value of interior design. Outreach activities at elementary schools and community events, in particular, have the potential to reach large portions of the public, spreading knowledge about what interior design is, what interior designers do, and why it matters. Greater appreciation for the profession will lead to higher design-program enrollment, which in turn will create a larger field of emerging designers as well as educators.

EDUCATION EMPOWERS DESIGN: TODAY AND IN THE FUTURE

As the industry embraces growing globalization, educators are changing the ways they teach to support the diverse student population, which now displays a rich array of ethnicities, cultures, and life experiences. Yet, in order to thrive in the coming years, the profession must do more than prepare today's emerging designers for success—it must actively cultivate future design educators. To accomplish this, current educators and practitioners must work together to champion diversity, strengthen connections between education and practice, prioritize design research, and promote greater public appreciation for interior design. Education is central to these endeavors and to the profession's continued evolution. Education, in all its forms, empowers design.

Opposite Page: Dr. Pamela K. Evans, Ph.D., IIDA, FIDEC

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Sarah Culpepper, Student IIDA / Amanda Gale, IIDA