

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 advancement 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.

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THE CURRENT STATE OF THE INTERIOR DESIGN CURRICULUM

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OVERVIEW



“If we stand together we are all more impactful.”

Stacy Walker, Industry IIDA Director of Customer Experience, Milliken

This fall, the International Interior Design Association (IIDA) held its inaugural Educators Roundtable, hosted by Milliken and held on the Roger Milliken Campus, convening members of the higher education community—from tenured professors to representatives of the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) and Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC)—alongside manufacturing executives and practitioners from global firms. In attendance were alums of institutions including Harvard’s School of Fine Art, Savannah College of Art and Design (SCAD), Oklahoma State, Virginia Tech, Columbia, SCI-Arc, and Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), as well as five recipients of the Milliken-sponsored IIDA Educator of the Year Award.

IIDA gathered this cross-section of industry notables to exchange intelligence and ideas, better understand each other’s challenges and needs, and determine how their bonds could be strengthened and resources leveraged to further the profession. **“If we stand together we are all more impactful,”** explained the event host, Milliken’s Stacy Walker, Industry IIDA. Integral to the conversation was how to attract and retain a broader diversity of talent in the profession through scholastic measures, starting in elementary school and continuing to the Ph.D. level. Accordingly, the group embraced an expansive definition

of design education and its constituents, from college freshman to second-career professionals. There was a consensus that education does not end in the classroom, but inevitably continues into the professional realm, where it can be better supported.

Over the course of the two-day event, participants outlined issues that complicate design education at all levels, from K-12 through college to professional development. Practitioners also divulged their expectations (and demands) of recent-graduate hires, and what resources those hires need to be better prepared for a design career—ensuring the “brain trust” stays in the profession and is equipped to assume eventual leadership of it.

IIDA EDUCATOR OF THE YEAR AWARD RECIPIENTS

- 2016: Lisa M. Tucker, Ph.D., IIDA, FIDEC, FASID, AIA, LEED AP BD+ C, WELL AP
Virginia Tech
- 2015: Virginia San Fratello, IIDA
San Jose State University
- 2014: So-Yeon Yoon, Ph.D., IIDA
Cornell University
- 2013: Amy Campos, IIDA
California College of the Arts
- 2012: Liset Robinson, IIDA
Savannah College of Art and Design

THE STATE OF INTERIOR DESIGN EDUCATION



Although the weekend’s discussion addressed the full spectrum of design education, from K-12 to CEUs, the primary focus was undergraduate and graduate interior design programs. On one hand, things look rosy. Economic recovery has created a strong demand for program graduates, and the most talented students typically receive their diplomas with multiple job offers in hand. And a sustained effort to educate the world about the profession’s value and unique skill set has begun to shift public perception. We are in a cultural moment that prizes making, design thinking, and user experience—characteristics that define our expertise.

On the other hand, educators face many and growing challenges at a time when the practice of interior design is becoming increasingly complex: reduced funding, the shrinking of four-year programs to three, increasingly prohibitive education costs, administrators forced to divert more time to fundraising. **“We are trying to do more in less time and with less money,”** concluded Pamela Evans.

“We are trying to do more in less time and with less money.”

Pamela Evans, Ph.D., IIDA, FIDEC, LEED AP



Moreover, the nature and quality of programs is inconsistent. Said Liset Robinson, IIDA, “There’s immense variety in the resources schools have and the opportunities we can give students. That creates a conundrum for practitioners. They might hire someone because of their degree—but may not understand what that degree really means, and thus have [unrealistic] expectations of [their training].”



THE CHALLENGES



EDUCATORS HAVE LESS TIME TO EDUCATE.

In higher education, there is a push to shrink programs to three years, as students are certainly financially disincentivized to linger in school longer than four.

“If I could change anything, it would be to challenge the thinking that education can happen in a short timeframe, and to slow down the pace of education, giving students the freedom to really learn,” said Lisa M. Tucker, Ph.D., IIDA, FIDEC, FASID, AIA, LEED AP BD+C, WELL AP. “Students come to us with so many different learning needs.”

This time crunch is compounded by students entering college less prepared than before, products of a K-12 education system riddled with budget cuts, reduced arts funding, and a teaching-to-the-test culture that leaves little time to flex creative thinking skills. “Kids are less equipped for college these days,” said Migette L. Kaup, Ph.D., IIDA, IDEC, ASID, EDAC—not only academically, she explains, but in terms of traits like grit and resiliency. “This generation lacks a certain comfort level with failure, which is vital to problem solving.” And, indeed, the design process.



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THE “SOFT SCIENCES” ARE GETTING SQUEEZED OUT.

Related to the above, topics like organizational behavior and psychology that are essential to professional success are being value-engineered right out of the college curriculum. “There’s no room in school for developing emotional intelligence, learning to be intuitive—those things that have everything to do with how we live, breath, act, and react,” said Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA, LEED AP.

THERE’S A LACK OF CONSISTENCY BETWEEN PROGRAMS.

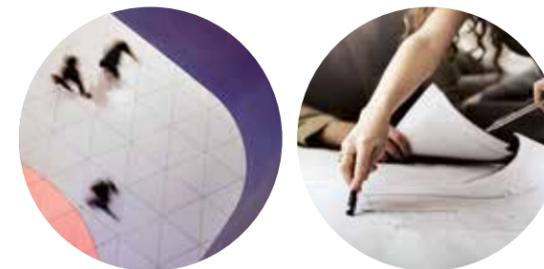
Despite standards set forth by CIDA, programs around the country vary widely. There is disparity between what interior design programs are called, where they reside within universities, and what topics and skills they cover. Some were initially borne from architecture schools, others from home-ec departments. You’ll find programs embedded or co-located within fine arts schools, architecture departments, or the social sciences.

Interestingly, Kansas State University has two programs in two different places: the Department of Apparel, Textiles, and Interior Design resides in the College of Human Ecology, while the Interior Architecture & Product Design program is within the College of Architecture, Planning, and Design. Students of the two departments don’t get much chance to interact until

after graduation, at which point many end up working together at the same firm, notes Kaup with some irony.



Some curricula are more theoretical, others more practical and skill based. “This is no ‘typical’ interior design curriculum,” said Evans. Although that is not necessarily a problem in practice—why shouldn’t schools have different focuses and specialties?—it nonetheless plays right into the industry’s identity crisis. “One of the primary criticisms thrown at the profession is that we lack consistency in nomenclature and regulation,” said Durst. “That has hurt us in some ways.”



INTERIOR DESIGN STILL SUFFERS FROM “AN ARCHITECTURE PROBLEM”—MORE SO IN ACADEMIA THAN IN PRACTICE.

Some expressed exasperation that interior design is discriminated against, often viewed as subservient or secondary to architecture. Complicating this, most faculty members have an M.A. in architecture, not interior design. Consequently, they tend to teach the discipline in a more “form-conscious” manner, divorced from “things

“Interior design programs address psychology of space, sound, lighting—topics that are not typically covered in a four-year undergraduate architecture degree.”

Annie Chu, IIDA, FAIA

that relate to humanity of inhabitations, which is the primary goal of our practice,” explained Jon Otis, IIDA. He frequently schools his students about the subtle differences between the sister disciplines, and how their curriculums vary. “I speak often about the validity and importance of being an interior designer versus an architect.”



As a corrective, CIDA will soon roll out new standards stipulating that a majority of full-time faculty, especially those teaching studio courses, need to have a degree in interior design and be NCIDQ-certified. “Very few CIDA-accredited programs currently meet that criteria,” said Robinson. Some schools, she explained, have added those qualifications to their promotion and tenure requirements.

THE STATE OF RECENT GRADUATES



So what traits and skills characterize today's interior design graduates—and do they correlate to what firms expect and/or need of their young hires? Does school prepare them well for practice?

Educators described the prototypical student they are attempting to mold: one with strong leadership skills, an innate and hands-on understanding of scale and proportion, solid presentation skills, ideally some technical fluency, and—most importantly—critical-thinking capabilities. “The expectations of practitioners is that [recent grads] who they’ve just hired will be able to hit the ground running,” said Evans. “We struggle with finding a balance between teaching skills—which is really the purview of a trade school, [not a design program at a university]—and making sure students become critical thinkers, capable of bringing a project to a whole new level.”

“We need people with skills, not just big thinkers.”
Jon P. Otis, IIDA



Design firms, meanwhile, are seeking in young hires spatial sensitivity and a technical understanding of what it takes to physically realize concepts they dream up. **“We need people with skills, not just big thinkers,”** said Otis. Some noted that this generation of recent grads lacked facility in scale and proportion and in reading sections and plans, a shortcoming that they largely attributed to the sophistication (and seductiveness) of rendering programs and students’ compensatory fluency in virtual media to express their ideas. But with a little prodding most admitted that it was not realistic to expect graduates to come out “fully formed” and that a certain amount of on-the-job training is par for the course. And much desired. “Millennials expect that firms will be educating them,” observed Annie Chu, IIDA, FAIA. Which didn’t mitigate designers’ frustration at having to school young hires on the finer points of site measuring and toe-kick height—only to see their “investment” jump ship to another firm after a few years.

But what design practitioners prized above all else was social/emotional intelligence and client savvy. “People who, even at the most junior level, can front the office



and be client facing,” as Chu put it. Bill Bouchey, IIDA, has observed that today’s junior staffers certainly have the desire and chutzpah to take on that role. “The young professional wants to help run the meeting, to be responsible for the agenda. This generation has expectations of flatter hierarchy and earlier client contact. As a result, we do a lot of coaching and modeling of behaviors and interactions so they are prepared to take on that role.”

He finds himself spending much of his time “undoing the millennials’ desire to have an answer for every question. I have to teach them to say, ‘I hear you, I don’t have that answer right now, but I can get it to you at the end of the day.’ If they can think on their feet like that, then you can put them in any setting.” Said Durst, “It’s the difference between listening with the intent to learn versus listening with an intent to reply.”

Again, a lot boils down to emotional intelligence: If a job candidate has it, they’re hired—and likely has the faculties to become, with coaching, an indispensable member of the firm. “You can’t fake the ability to communicate,” said James Kerrigan, IIDA, LEED AP ID+C, who finds the caliber of today’s candidates to be “terrific.”



BRIDGING THE DIVIDE



There is a documented need for entities to fill the gap between what schools have the time and resources to teach and what experience and skills young professionals need to flourish on the job and support their superiors. The onus falls on all industry members—educators, practitioners, manufacturers, organizations—to contribute, and success depends on those sectors collaborating more closely. Finger pointing (“Kids these days don’t learn hand rendering!” “Firms have unrealistic expectations of what we have the time to teach!”) is less productive than working together to problem-solve our common challenges for overall industry

benefit. Mentorship, coaching, modeling, and ongoing professional development are key. So is reflecting on the strengths that current grads do have: ambition, emotional intelligence, big ideas. Using those attributes to mutual advantage will free up creative thinking time for practitioners at all stages of their career.

“There is a tension between teaching what to do versus how to think.”

Cheryl Durst, Hon. FIIDA, LEED AP



WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

Acknowledging that schools have ever-shrinking resources and budgets, there are still many avenues for implementing change.

CREATE MORE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CROSS-DISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION.

Another point of differentiation is our unique ability to work with and choreograph other practitioners. “Interior design is the discipline best positioned to engage with allied professionals; it’s trans-disciplinary,” said Chu. Exposure to interdisciplinary collaboration such as cross-department projects and all-school charities is an important experience. And a smart recruiting tool: Educators spoke of students switching majors to interior design after being introduced to the discipline through such projects. “This is a huge opportunity as we try to make the discipline more diverse and lure new talent to the field—like computer renderers and UX practitioners,” said So-Yeon Yoon, Ph.D., IIDA. “Execution of design will be a huge issue in the near future because fewer people are willing to sit in front of a computer all day, and that’s what it takes to get things built,” said Kerrigan. If we want to create a larger corps of professional draftspeople with high screen stamina, we may need to woo students from disciplines like gaming, coding, and special effects.

POSITION THE DISCIPLINE AS THE HUMANIST PURSUIT THAT IT IS.

Schools are not only just tasked with teaching students a mindset and skill set; they are also well positioned to help contextualize the discipline vis-à-vis related ones, and to explain and promote the practice’s competitive advantage—to students, their parents, and even guidance counselors. Interior designers are business savvy strategists and creators of beauty; problem solvers and applied artists; they work in the residential and commercial spheres. Their area of expertise, summarized Amy Campos, IIDA, “is habitability.” Added Evans, “Interior design’s [thing] is not just space planning; we space plan because of people. That is knowledge that we have ownership of.”

BOLSTER COMMUNITY OUTREACH.

Educators touted the benefits of school-sponsored design projects serving their community—redesigning bike lanes, teaching design thinking to middle-school students, making design changes for ADA compliance, etc. Such efforts expose students to collaboration, allow them to interact with end users, strengthen town/gown



“There is not enough conversation about giving back. The conversation about being a leader and going into teaching has to start in the classroom.”

Tara Headley, Assoc. IIDA, Allied ASID, NEWH



relationships, provide philanthropy-minded students the chance to give back, and help make design accessible to a broader audience. It's also a way to take advantage of a resource schools do have in abundance: “lots of warm bodies,” noted Virginia San Fratello, IIDA.

OPEN YOUR DOORS TO PROFESSIONALS.

Schools often invite practitioners to attend juries or serve as visiting lecturers, but there are other, perhaps more fruitful, ways to forge relationships—some of which could also generate revenue. Colleges could offer externships, inviting design professionals to participate in classes or beef up continuing education programs for practitioners. “Devoting three hours a week for 18 weeks would provide a formalized way of engaging and participating in schools,” said Bouchey. “It could give educators support, guidance, and mentoring.”

Another model for reaching professionals, some suggested, was to offer certificates in specialties such as lighting, acoustics, exhibit design, or materials science, or short, module-like professional development courses.

ENCOURAGE MORE STUDENTS TO PURSUE A MASTER’S OR PH.D.—AND TO EVENTUALLY BECOME EDUCATORS THEMSELVES.

More students pursuing a master’s before entering the workforce would enrich and elevate the profession. “Putting in time and effort to build the research agenda is critical to fuel the profession,” said Chu. “That’s how we push the boundaries of the discipline. Interior design is still emerging; theory and history are not part of the cannon. We still need to borrow and cobble it together from psychology, the social sciences, etc.” Mary Beldsoe agreed that academia is the last refuge and a safe space for big thinking. “Educators don’t have the billable hours issue we have. They can sit and talk about big concepts; we don’t always have time to.”

Recent graduate Tara Headley, Assoc. IIDA, Allied ASID, NEWH, who “kind of fell into” pursuing her M.A., implored educators to encourage more students to stay in school. “Going to grad school opened my eyes to how complex our industry is and the meaning behind it—not just the aesthetics. Until I went to grad school, I didn’t realize how much I didn’t know!” She also felt that professors could do a better job of selling a future in academia: **“There is not enough conversation about giving back. The conversation about being a leader and going into teaching has to start in the classroom.”**

Educators have a tendency to sell the profession short because of the relatively low pay, said Campos. “But there’s a lot that’s really wonderful about being an educator: the interaction with students, the lifestyle, the time you have to do your own work.”



WHAT PROFESSIONALS CAN DO

BECOME ACQUAINTED WITH THE CIDA STANDARDS—AND OFFER YOUR INPUT.

“How many designers even know what the CIDA standards are?” Evans asked the group. “You should. Download the standards: You’d be surprised how rigorous they are.” She adds that the standards are continuously reviewed and tweaked—and more comprehensively overhauled about every decade. “We seek input from the public, educators, and practitioners, but I’m not sure we receive as much input from the latter as we should.” Have an opinion? Weigh in.



SHARE YOUR RESEARCH.

Most firms that conduct research keep it close to the vest, but secrecy does the industry a disservice, said educators. “Sharing it will increase the level of body of knowledge that’s ours,” said Evans. “A dialogue between firms and educators increases our level of expertise in the public eye.” Which is much needed: “People still don’t see interior design as a rigorous endeavor,” said Chu.



EDUCATE THE GENERAL PUBLIC—ONE CLIENT AT A TIME—ABOUT THE VALUE OF THE PROFESSION.

Designers and educators both shoulder the burden of explaining (and advocating for) the profession to the public—not only prospective students, their parents, and guidance counselors but also legislators and practitioners of related professions. The effort is ongoing, and we need to continually refine the message. One roundtable participant suggested taking a cue from the marijuana lobby: “They were out to educate, not win—and in so doing, won in a way that made it look like an overnight success.”

INVITE STUDENTS INTO YOUR OFFICE.

Invite senior-level classes into firm critiques to expose them to the process. Silverman Trykowski Assoc. hosts weekly cocktail sessions during which designers take turns sharing a research topic, and they often invite guests—recently a group of international students from Boston Architectural College. “It started as a ‘come see what our firm is like’ event,” said Felice Silverman, FIIDA, “but we ended up having a phenomenal discussion about global workplace culture. It was as much of an education, if not more, for our firm as it was for the students.”



OPEN YOUR DOORS TO EDUCATORS—AND NOT JUST FROM SCHOOLS YOU’RE ALREADY ACQUAINTED WITH.

There exists a clear need to improve the dialogue between educators and firms (and manufacturers, too). Consider inaugurating an educator-in-residence program at your office—perhaps an educator on leave or sabbatical who can help execute research, nurture young professionals, etc. If Google can have a poet-in-residence, why can’t you have an embedded professor or dean? And don’t limit yourself to one: “Having multiple people in residence at the same time works better,” said Campos. “Those mixing moments are really helpful.”

It will help your firm and the educator: “We currently have educators who need more work experience to take the NCIDQ,” noted Robinson.

HOST A STUDENT EXHIBIT IN YOUR OFFICE.

Chu described Woodbury’s practice of holding student exhibits at different design offices throughout the L.A. area. “Inevitably it becomes a recruiting event, making it easy for firms to see an array of student work. Most of my students get a job from that.”

IF YOU ARE A MINORITY PROFESSIONAL, REACH OUT TO STUDENTS.

You will be a role model and an inspiration. “You don’t know what’s possible until you see someone who looks like you in the profession,” said Headley. “Seeing female African-American and Latina professionals at NeoCon literally told me it was possible. It blew my mind to see myself in that position!”

GIVE MORE AUTONOMY TO THE JUNIOR STAFFERS.

Sometimes a baptism by fire is the best way to learn. Staffers acquire more advanced skills at a younger age, and superiors will then have more strategic thinking time. Said Walker, “Everyone struggles tremendously with ‘butterfly time’: Finding the time to move away from a project in order to be influenced by something seemingly unrelated that could change our perspective.”



AVAILABLE RESOURCES



- The IIDA Diversity Award: A partnership between the IIDA Foundation and the IDEC Foundation, this \$5,000 prize will recognize and honor a full-time educator who is somehow representative of diversity (race, gender, etc.) and also actively advancing diversity in interior design education. The emphasis on diversity will remain a constant, but exactly how it’s celebrated may shift from year to year.
- Awards and Scholarships: Numerous awards and scholarships are available for current and future interior design students—some sponsored by specific institutions, others spearheaded by industry organizations (including the IIDA Foundation) and manufacturers. Roundtable participants were excited about the prospect of IIDA creating a comprehensive list of said awards and scholarships, which could become an invaluable industry resource and recruiting tool.
- 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. IIDA works hard to find an appropriate match—“students have become more specific and savvy about what discipline or specialty they want to pursue,” said Durst—and to support mentor efforts at every turn. “Our goal is to equip mentors with more programming—talking points, ideas, resources—to help them through the process,” said Ryan Ben. The program exposes students to all

aspects of the industry. “Everyone wants to mentor with a firm principal, but we aim to show students what jobs and titles they didn’t know existed.” IIDA can also be exploited for informal mentoring—introducing students to prospective employers over the phone, for instance. Traditional-age students and second-career professionals have very different mentoring needs.

- IIDA has created the Leadership By Design educational series that addresses “people skills” and the human sciences to better expand the education of designers and IIDA Members; it may grow into an “expert leader” certificate program. “The goal is to provide professional development in a bespoke format,” explained Durst.

URLS:

National Council for Interior Design Qualification (NCIDQ): www.ncidqexam.org

Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC): www.idec.org

Interior Design Continuing Education Council (IDCEC): www.idcec.org

Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA): www.accredit-id.org

National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD): www.nasad.arts-accredit.org

IIDA Student Resources www.iida.org/students

IIDA Foundation www.iida.org/foundation

Milliken www.milliken.com