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Career Opportunities: Connecting Design Students With Industry

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Abstract

Given an era of rapid advances in communications and graphic techniques, students of design need exposure to the hectic, highly competitive world of design – well before their student days are over. Is the design hub of New York a closed circuit among industries led by alumni from private colleges and universities? Are student opportunities and career outcomes significantly different depending on the type of institution they attend, rather than the type of degree they earn?

In looking at five design institutions in New York City (New York City College of Technology (CUNY), Fashion Institute of Technology (SUNY), Pratt Institute, the School of Visual Arts (SVA) and Cooper Union, two public, two private not-for profit and one private for profit) this study investigates college efforts to connect design students with industry, and hopes to shed light on the unique challenges students attending NYC public colleges face within college and upon graduation as they establish careers.

Representatives from five colleges were contacted and asked to respond to a brief survey, consisting of six questions relating to what their schools do to connect students with industry. Everyone contacted responded, and the surveys were followed up with informal phone conversations.

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1. Introduction

In theory, the environment of the New York City's design community is ideal and should be self-sustaining for academic institutions. Schools create designers, designers are hired by industry, schools hire designers from industry to teach, and teachers look to students for fresh talent.

And yet there are challenges in developing and maintaining a curriculum that is flexible and nimble and can anticipate growth in technical innovation. As business models reflect declining print markets and the shift to digital and mobile markets, academic institutions are under pressure to adjust to such far-reaching changes. A whole range of technologies required to create and deliver content remain in a continuous state of flux. The labor market demands a highly skilled workforce, and yet technologies change so rapidly its difficult to gage the value of investing the time and energy needed to master specialized skills that can become obsolete overnight.

According to an article on zero hedge.com (Durden, 2014) the wages of the top 10% of designers have risen strongly; the wages of the average designer have not. There is a shortage of skilled designers, but it can only be seen in the wages of those designers who have managed to master new technologies." While Durden makes an interesting point, he applies the term 'graphic designer' in a general sense that includes territory that is essentially the domain of developers and programmers.

Durden's observation none-the-less begs the question: For what sort of careers are design schools preparing their students? While the fundamental principles of design and communication remain constant, technological developments in the field of design have evolved significantly in recent years. Does coursework that adequately qualifies students for entry-level positions prepare them for eventual leadership in their profession?

In looking at five design institutions in New York City (New York City College of Technology (CUNY), Fashion Institute of Technology (SUNY), Pratt Institute, the School of Visual Arts (SVA) and Cooper Union, two public, two private not-for profit and one private for profit) this study investigates college efforts to connect design students with industry, and hopes to shed light on the unique challenges students attending NYC public colleges face within college and upon graduation as they establish careers. Are their opportunities and career outcomes different because of the type of institution they attend, rather than the type of degree they earn? Is the design hub of New York a closed circuit between industries that are led with alumni from private colleges and universities?

2. A City like New York, and its Remarkable Growth in Design Education

New York City is a major center for design. This is particularly evident in the number of design programs that attract students from all over the world. New York graduates more design students than any other US city. According to the Institutional Postsecondary Data Systems (IPED), design graduates increased by 40 percent citywide between 2005 and 2010. This compares with only 20 percent for a combined total of all other majors (IPEDS, 2014). Current data suggest this enrollment trend will continue to grow.

The cost of going to college in New York City is significant. It ranks 16th among the 20 most expensive cities in the world (Forbes, 2014). College tuition varies widely between public and private institutions. The five institutions sited in this paper illustrate the higher cost of attending a private vs. public college (see table 1.1). Because public institutions are less expensive and often include open-enrollment policies, they attract a greater population from the lower half of the income distribution, especially community colleges (Bellafante, 2014, 12).

Table 1. Five Design Institutions in New York City Surveyed *Per Semester

	CityTech	FIT	Pratt	SVA	Cooper Union
Public/Private	Public	Public	Private	Private	Private
Applicants	Open	4,419	3,987	3,218	3,415
Admitted		1,916	2,609	2,373	264
Acceptance	Open	43.4%	65.4%	73.7%	7.7%
Per Credit	\$260	\$257	\$1,383	\$1,076	N/A
Tuition*	\$3,015	\$3085	\$21,433	\$16,780	\$19,800

In recent years several New York City design schools have been cited among the top ten, nation-wide, by both *Bloomberg Business Week* and *U.S. News and World Report*, including Parsons, Pratt, Columbia, School of Visual Arts - SVA, FIT (SUNY), NYU's Tisch School of the Arts and Cooper Union, in categories including Architecture, Visual Communications, Multi-media, Fashion, Interior-Design and Graphic Design. These highly rated schools, primarily private, attract a large population of out-of-state and foreign students (Parsons 34 percent and SVA 25 percent compared with 11 percent for the combined total of all other majors (Parchment, 2014).

The City University of New York (CUNY), comprised of 24 institutions, is the nation's largest urban public university consisting of 11 senior colleges and seven community colleges. The University serves more than 270,000 degree-credit students and 273,000 adult, continuing and professional education students (City Tech, 2015). Students come from over 208 countries making the university one of the most diverse in the country. Additionally, 28 percent of the student population is older than age 25. Diversity can mean a classroom full of students who have barely received their high school equivalency diplomas as well as students who have completed undergraduate degrees in their countries of origin.

A large portion of students attending CUNY have competing outside obligations including parenthood. Many students enter the institution with inadequate prior education and require considerable remediation. Despite evidence suggesting that additional support for students yields better outcomes, from 2000 to 2010 nationwide, the amount spent on community colleges for student services decreased 5 percent and for academic support 13 percent. Conversely, in private institutions spending in those same areas increased by nearly one-third (Bellafante, 2014, 11).

3. Industry Relations Questionnaire & Findings

Five college representatives from different institutions were asked to respond to a brief survey consisting of six questions relating to what their schools do to connect students with industry. Everyone contacted responded, and the surveys were followed up with informal phone conversations.

All respondents indicated that their schools are involved with industry to some extent. Results revealed there is much overlap in aspirations, but each school is faced with unique challenges and strategies for connecting to the professional world. The three private schools, where tuition runs higher (see table 1.1), had 'career development' centers dedicated to supporting departments in developing deeper and more targeted connections in the commercial world.

Table 2. Question 1: Portfolio Reviews (PR): Are students required to participate in a portfolio review during the course of their studies?

PR	Required	Semester(s)	Campus	Industry	Organized	Budget
CityTech	Yes	8 th - Final	No	Yes (20-30)	Dept.	No - Dept.
FIT	Yes	8 th - Final	Yes	Yes (100-150)	Dept.	No - Dept.
Pratt	No	In classes	Yes	No	Career Dev	Yes
SVA	Yes	8 th - Final	Yes	Yes (50-200)	Dept.	Yes
CU	N/A	In classes	Yes	No	Career Dev	No

Table 3. Question 3: Internships: Are students required to participate in an internship?

Internships	Required	Semester(s)	Industry	Budget	Paid
CityTech	Yes	6 th , 7 th or 8 th	A few	No	No
FIT	Yes	8 th	Yes	No	No
Pratt	No	Encouraged	Yes	No	No
SVA	No	Encouraged	Yes	No	No
CU	No	Encouraged	A few	Yes	No

Table 4. Question 4: Speaker Series (SS) : Does your school host on campus speaker series?

SS	School	# Per Semester	Organized by	Honorarium
CityTech	Yes	4 – 5	Students	No
FIT	Yes	1 Each Term	Dept.	Yes, a small one
Pratt	Yes	‘Creative-Morning’ Talks	Career Dev Dept.	Not usually
SVA	Yes	1-2 Panel Discussions	Career Dev Dept.	Not usually
CU	Yes	5 large, several small	Career Dev Dept.	Yes for large ones

Generally, all five-design institutions in New York City have kept apace of recent innovations in production techniques and media platforms, but their emphasis on these hands-on aspects of the design profession varied significantly. For most of the schools interviewed, connecting students to industry is primarily limited by budget, reputation and manpower. This is particularly true of public institutions, such as the New York City College of Technology (CityTech) a senior college of the City University of New York (CUNY).

If design programs can distinguish themselves from their competition and develop a reputation within industry, they will provide more opportunity for their students. The real value of cultivating such relations is that over time schools build pipelines that lead to scholarships, internships, lectures, faculty, job opportunities and ultimately stronger name recognition within the field. This strengthens programs as it makes them more desirable to applicants.

The School of Visual Arts (SVA) seems to understand this well. SVA’s faculty is made up of mostly practicing adjunct faculty with established connections to industry. The school has a career development department that is devoted to cultivating relationships with industry on behalf of the entire school. The department tries to grow and build industry partnerships. Their career development department will also collaborate with individual departments to help them with their individual needs. For example they help the Illustration department host annual portfolio reviews at the Art Directors Club.

With roughly 14,272 students enrolled, CityTech is the largest public college of technology in the Northeast offering a variety of disciplines ranging from culinary studies to computer information systems technology to communication design. The Communication Design department housed within this larger college struggles to gain greater name recognition within industry. And while CityTech has a career service department, resources are stretched thin and it is unable to devote the special attention needed within diverse departments.

The Fashion Institute of Technology – FIT (SUNY) also a public institution, requires an application process including a portfolio review for students to attend. It does not therefore represent the most vulnerable populations. The Graphic Design department enjoys a considerable reputation within the well-known art school, which receives international recognition as a top Fashion school. Perhaps because of its well establish brand and more affordable price tag, it proves to be more competitive to attend then both SVA and Pratt (see table 1.).

Alumni are a powerful asset that if carefully cultivated can become a school’s most powerful ally. Design departments therefore have a vested interest in getting their students into established positions. SVA has several graduates working for *Facebook*. Each year they organize a campus site visit with *Facebook* (see table 4.). Located in San Francisco, *Facebook* comes to New York for a day-long visit with SVA. Visits include morning presentations followed by an in-depth look at their hiring practices. Recently SVA has been working on a job fair with industry partners where the entire school would be invited to participate. They keep track of -- and tap into -- their alumni for additional support and contacts.

Building partnerships with industry is mutually beneficial to institutions and working professionals. For the schools, it not only serves the students well, but it helps to influence and keep curriculum relevant and current. For industry, it is a chance to scout new talent. Pratt also has an active and involved center for career & professional development department. Like SVA, Pratt’s career services department will collaborate with individual departments to help them with individual needs. The department works with and advises students directly.

Pratt also actively pursues partnerships with industry. The career & professional development department is involved in its end of year student show, where all graduates exhibit their work at the Manhattan Center, a large space off campus they rent out for several days. Over 14,000 industry professionals are invited. About 1,500 attend the opening reception (see table 2.). Recently they have been organizing and hosting a monthly “creative-morning”

talk, where they invite industry professionals to meet with students in small groups (see table 4.). The event is open to the entire school and well attended by both industry and students. The talks are meant to be informal, low-stake events where students can learn more about a particular company or designer, and professionals can review and scout fresh talent. Pratt also hosts five similar evening events each semester, with a collection of 15-20 industry professionals.

Events like portfolio reviews and internships are essential in that they give students a chance to practice their interview skills and receive honest feedback on their work in a non-competitive environment (see table 2 & 3.). Portfolio reviews also provide senior-level students with the opportunity to network with potential employers. The Communication Design department at CityTech serves approximately 1200 students. Its biggest event is the end of year portfolio review, which has been hosted off campus in the last four years. Industry professionals are invited and although there has been a steady increase each year, turnout has been low (see table 2.). The department is relatively young in comparison to the other schools surveyed. It is also housed in a college where there are many other disciplines, and therefore suffers from lack of name recognition within industry.

To genuinely engage students in the creative process, the classroom environment has limitations. Design is driven by technology, and the reality of today's work environment is that technology is ever-evolving. To best prepare students to be competitive and fluid in such environments, students must be encouraged to look beyond their coursework and connect with professionals in industry (see table 3.). Cooper Union, a highly selective and relatively small program (270 students in the School of Art), is also active in its outreach to industry.

Their center for career development department works independently from other departments but supports faculty and students individually. Among the schools surveyed, Cooper Union is perhaps the most strategic in terms of the relationships it forges. It pursues collaboration with other colleges on grant-sponsored research projects. Cooper Union has also organized several social events with Parsons, Columbia, and NYU's Tisch School, so that students have the chance to network with peers. It also has an active alumni association in direct contact with their student governance body (see table 3.). These relationships foster opportunity, and rather than merely encouraging semester-long internships, Cooper Union has initiated what is called an *externship* program, with students participating in intense, weeklong exposure to industry.

4. Implications

There are significant costs involved in providing students with a viable, competitive and relevant design education. In a series of recent articles appearing in the New York Times, Ginia Bellafante (2014) points out private research colleges spend three times as much per student as public community colleges (Bellafante, 2014, 11). While 45 percent of the nations undergraduates are enrolled in public institutions, in the past five years these colleges have felt a steady decline in revenues spent per student. And still enrollment continues to grow.

Companies are not the dependable job creators they may once have been. Independent contracts and freelance positions have been on a steady rise over the past ten years (BLS, 2014). To secure and maintain these temporary, highly competitive assignments, designers have to be savvy and well versed in both business and design skills.

Private colleges tend to possess enormous endowments, some in billions of dollars. In public institutions well-off alumni are not as prevalent, especially in community colleges, and because of the administrative costs involved, public institutions are also less likely to have large, aggressive fund raising departments to solicit significant donations.

Among alternative ways to connect students with industry, online resources and social media outlets have revolutionized the process of searching for a job. Investing in such online resources and using them to showcase students has proved to be a promising opportunity for colleges, especially those located in rural areas. Such promising innovations, however, cannot match the advantages of connecting design students directly with their potential employers by such means as internships, portfolio reviews, gallery shows, competitions, and lecture series. Such contacts provide mentored environments that enrich the curriculum while providing students with valuable insights regarding future career choices. Such face-to-face introductions to industry provide students with opportunities to make valuable connections.

These efforts, however, require a financial commitment. Public institutions rely heavily on government appropriations and foundation grants for financial support (Bellafante, 2014, 11). In the last ten years this type of funding has scarcely increased, and there is little reason to believe funding in this area will grow in the near future. As demonstrated by the survey for this paper, public institutions rely heavily on their faculty to forge connections with industry. Private institutions, however, have far more robust resources to create and sustain such relationships.

For mature, capable and self-motivated design students, public education in New York City is an excellent choice because it is far more cost-effective than the private alternatives. But for the need-based populations that these public institutions often serve, the necessary support systems are lacking. Students are often caught in bureaucratic dilemmas trying to synchronize the schedules of their required courses with the scheduling requirements necessary to receive financial aid. Most students have fulltime obligations outside of school related to family and to part-time jobs, and many struggle with basic needs such as transportation, housing and food. The average award for students who receive financial aid is \$4,555 a year, an amount that barely covers tuition, despite the high living expenses of metropolitan areas such as New York City (Bellafante, 2014, 11).

In addition to their teaching responsibilities, the faculties of five design institutions in New York City face challenges in providing ties to industry that enhance the learning process for their classes. Establishing such enduring professional relationships with well-qualified industrial designers can be a daunting task, but in my experience, well worth the effort. For design students to be competitive and adaptable in today's environment, exposure to the working world they will be stepping into is essential.

Graphic design programs should be preparing their students to pursue entry-level positions that put them on a path to become art directors, creative directors, and entrepreneurs running their own businesses. Although providing a source of fresh designers well versed in recent technology for entry-level production positions is essential, it should not be the ultimate objective of design education at the college level. Because of the nature of the designer-client relationship, offering design students real-world projects in collaboration with actual clients can help avoid the pitfall of a dead-end production position and provide a more solid perspective for navigating a successful career.

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