

# CREATING THE STRATEGIC GENERALIST

a proposed curricular model for graphic design education

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The examples you see before you are just a few of many that evidence the demand for graphic designers to focus on work which "...reflects the scale of contemporary problems, the reality of design offices, and the nature of projects that require expertise outside graphic design for their resolution."

## **Defining a T-shaped person:**

A T-shaped person, as defined by Tim Brown, head of Ideo, is a person who has a broad base of knowledge and experiences coupled with one or more specialized areas of interest and skill.

For the sake of clarity, let us take a holistic perspective and define what is meant by generalist, specialist, and even sub-specialist. Relative to the rest of the world, graphic design should be considered a specialty. An interaction designer or a motion graphics designer should be viewed as a sub-specialist. We must not ignore our highly sub-specialized bodies of knowledge in relation to other disciplines with which we work.

It is rare that a designer works across *all* sub-specialities with any depth of insight. Oftentimes designers gain expertise in a few distinct areas over time – signage, environmental, and publication design for example. Many of us can relate to this eclectic accretion of knowledge that make us "strategic generalists".

## **Why T-shaped people are important**

T-shaped people are important because their multiple perspectives enhance interdisciplinary team collaborations. Their empathetic nature is borne out of their wide-ranging experiences, which enables them to bridge gaps between departments or between the client and their audience. In short, it produces good, original insights.

Design consultant and educator Terry Irwin argues against specialization because it "...renders (designers) unable to see the unity in things, or more simply put, to effectively participate in 'big picture' thinking and ultimately the design of solutions for big problems."

Employers are also looking for strategic generalists. Ideo specifically states that T-shaped people are who they look to place in their studio. One employer interviewed says, "It is nearly impossible for a student to have a meaningful level of specialization. Undergraduate education gets you to the starting line of your career. You will learn more in the first year on the job than you learned in 4-5 years in school." Two interaction design professionals interviewed specifically cited T-shaped designers as preferred hires, adding that cross-disciplinary knowledge is what contributes to a designer's professional success. It goes without saying that T-shaped people are valuable in research, management, and writing endeavors.

## **The path to specialization**

College undergraduate studies in general ed build more deeply into the broad base of the "T" established in high school. It is this type of complementary study at a college level of understanding that is critical in building a T-shaped person. Meredith Davis stresses the relevance to graphic design of linguistics, cognitive psychology, anthropology, sociology and other social sciences, saying they "hold much insight for graphic designers...."

The declaration of a major is an obvious stepping stone to specialization, with curricula moving from equal samplings of all subjects as in high school to a balance between focused and generalized areas of study. Study within a major is what begins the focused stem of the “T” for students.

In spite of the initial focus the major brings, Sharon Poggenpohl and Katherine McCoy both assert that a four-year undergraduate program provides little more than a strong base from which to leap. McCoy states, “...whereas **undergraduate schools must necessarily concentrate on a broad spectrum of fundamentals**, graduate programs provide specialized focus and faculty resources.”

MFA study in graphic design, and the thesis in particular, is clearly a place for high-level specialization (or sub-specialization) to begin taking shape. Graduate education is the place to use design research to build bridges between theory and practice. For graduate work to be meaningful, it must be focused in some way – on context, audience, message cycle, media/technology, or other factors. The MFA experience equips students with more focused interests and abilities, strengthening the “T” stem.

As the final step, a PhD may be viewed as the pinnacle of sub-specialization, for its role in the field is the generation of new knowledge through extended design research. The reintroduction of electives at this level should be noted as a nod to the need for a range of knowledge that complements the focused study occurring in design.

The shift from a broad range of exploration in a BFA program to the specificity of the workplace can be startling for students. Sub-specialties in graphic design range widely, from focus on design’s use to media focus to audience focus. It is also important to note that these sub-specializations often are necessarily coupled with generalizations in other areas. A marketing communications company may focus on particular audiences but range widely across media types. An interactive studio may produce work exclusively for the web but design for a wide range of audiences. These professional situations are the norm, and evidence the value of a T-shaped combination of broad and specialized knowledge.

The accretion of knowledge in various professional practice situations constitutes a career-long lengthening of the “T” as designers discover and refine strengths, work in new areas, and learn from the school of professional life at their own pace.

#### **Where undergrad fits in: a case study**

Kansas City Art Institute is an independent college of art and design granting a BFA in art with a particular emphasis – in this case, graphic design. There are a number of strengths in this particular context, relative to the larger field of graphic design.

One of the obvious strengths of an “art school” is that they attract and nurture a particular type of student. Because of our attachment to the fine arts, students entering graphic design are more wholly focused on the expressive/creative aspects of design, and are predisposed to experimentation, drawing, and emotive/intuitive thinking.

Faculty and staff are well versed in dealing with this type of student, and create an environment that nurtures and broadens those dispositions. Through their individually provided studio spaces, the students themselves create a rich and unusual culture of play and experimentation as a natural outgrowth of the work they make. Radical cheerleading is not often found in a university setting.

Another major strength of this situation is that students are able to draw on a full range of high-level art-making activities through elective coursework. This allows them to utilize facilities and engage in dialogue with students or faculty from various disciplines. Electives allows for the commingling of fine art and design perspectives at both the faculty and student level, enriching the viewpoints of all. Fine art students immersed in self-initiated projects bring a level of criticality to design work not often seen in a university setting.

Funding at KCAI is focused on the creation of art and design students – the primary goal of the Institute – rather than more lucrative research ventures in a university setting. In fact, within an art school context, design is often seen as the “cash cow” and draws a significant amount of funding relative to fine art disciplines.

Once instilled, this creative way of thinking and making continue in much the same manner after school. The flurry of discussion surrounding Richard Florida and Daniel Pink’s recent writings point to an increased awareness of the contributions creative thinkers can make in the marketplace. Pink’s statement regarding the MFA as the new MBA rings true as we see companies innovate by making emotional and aesthetic connections to their audiences. Education in an art school context sets a perfect stage for success in MFA programs, where students can find niches and deepen their understanding of graphic design sub-specialties. An undergraduate art school experience can also provide a strong base of creative thought for those pursuing a MBA.

All of these factors combine to form a kind of specialization apart from curricular specialization that is unique to an independent school of art and design. In light of workplace demands, it seems logical to balance this specialized context with a broad approach to graphic design – one that will facilitate unique approaches to the wide range of design problems students will inevitably encounter.

### **Weaknesses of generalizing**

With the strengths of an art school come weaknesses, most all of which stem from two factors: its “private” status and scale of operation.

Isolation is a major hurdle for KCAI, especially if a generalist graphic design degree is sought. It lacks connections to significant programs relevant to graphic design, such as linguistics, cognitive psychology, and social sciences offerings mentioned previously. Individual classes in these subjects lack the overall breadth and depth of knowledge and resources entire university departments can provide.

Because the school is necessarily focused primarily on art and design, the library is limited in scope. This creates problems for the often wide-ranging subject matter graphic design addresses.

Underpinning all of the shortcomings is the fact that, as a private institution, KCAI is tuition driven, tying us to a more market-driven cycle of supply and demand. Funding, of course, affects everything from facilities quality to library resources to attracting faculty.

### **How curriculum might facilitate the creation of T-shaped people**

The curriculum I advocate as creating a T-shaped person is not much different than many that currently exist. It does, however prioritize a simultaneous approach to working across media, rather than a “print to screen” linear sequence. It also favors utilizing sub-specialists in the classroom wherever possible to model an interdisciplinary approach and ensure quality teaching across the range of design problems.

The basic T-shaped curricular approach begins building on the width of the T through a wide range of freshman foundation studies in both art and design. A healthy supplement of the social sciences should be highly recommended as general ed coursework, along with the usual art and design history coursework. Within the major, studio courses should repeatedly spiral through a wide range of contexts, audiences, and media, always asserting design's connections to the rest of the world.

The senior year may culminate with a specialized studio in the fall that allows students to explore a pre-determined set of issues (defined more by communication need rather than media type) but allow a good degree of interpretation so they may focus their work on specific factors and interests within that framework. This exploration will prepare students for a three-credit degree project of their choosing, occurring in their final senior semester. The degree project and the preceding specialized semester constitute the beginnings of the "T" stem for undergraduate work. The majority of their study balances a broad mix of graphic design fundamentals and general education requirements, with the ability to explore new found areas of interest in the senior year. This mix should provide them with a marketable generalist design skill set balanced by a small sampling of projects demonstrating proficiency within a sub-specialty of graphic design.

To support this case are a few examples of KCAI alums in both sub-specialized graphic design practice and pursuing graduate work.

Will Staley is an industrial design grad student at Pratt. His thesis focuses on sustainable design systems as an economic engine for the nation's most impoverished counties. His study has led him to work with the design management department at Pratt, and the project theoretically spans from architecture to product development to graphic design.

Since undergrad, Cody Langford continues to hone his skills in corporate print work as well as teaching himself new skills through developing his own letterpress studio, which he promotes in both the physical and virtual world.

Amanda Zeitler is a grad student in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design at University of the Arts, Philadelphia. Her work occurs within a very specific context but draws on multiple design disciplines for potentially diverse audiences.

Kenny Kim is an Interactive Designer whose work is wide-ranging in regards to design solution and audience, but specific in regards to media.

It has been my intention to show the continued need for a broad range of fundamentals for undergraduates. This will balance a lifetime of increasing sub-specialization that will inevitably follow.

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