

Future Interior Design Educators Will Make the Difference for Our Profession By Georgy Olivieri

During NeoCon, an alarm was sounded for the interior design profession. The warning was loud and clear; due to the serious decline in the pool of interior design educators, our profession is in trouble. We need to do something and do it fast to continue fostering future generations of interior designers with the ever advancing skill set demanded by our clients.

One of the actionable ideas surfaced during the NeoCon panel discussion, sponsored by Kimball Office entitled *Call to Action; Dialogue about Sustaining the Future of Interior Design Education*, advocated recruiting and provision of incentives for practitioners to return to school for their advanced degrees.

Laura Smith of Perkins+Will/Eva Maddox Branded Environments is our declared ‘poster person’, a positive role model walking the talk with her decision to leave practice and return to school. As a featured panelist in the *Call to Action*, she shared her perspective as a practitioner with five years of studio experience and her declaration to attend the University of Michigan this fall to teach interior design.

Laura volunteered that the motivating factor in her decision was to make a difference for the profession of interior design. Since she graduated with an interior design major, she dreamed of pursuing her masters to teach. Immediately after graduation she took her GRE tests, receiving excellent scores. The five-year limitation for GRE admittance to graduate school became her self-proclaimed deadline for returning to school.

According to Jane Kucko, FIDEC, President of IDEC, “ Laura Smith is a premier example of the type of individual who we want to enter the academy. Laura has the professional experience required to be an educator blended with curiosity regarding more in depth study of the interior design profession... Laura demonstrates the sincere passion to truly make a difference and will touch young minds in a very meaningful way.”

As we discussed among the various stakeholders during the *Call to Action*, Laura personally experienced the lack of a clear path to an advanced degree in interior education. Some programs focus on interior design studio experience, while others foster research. With her background in studio practice, she felt she would benefit most from a research-based program.

She toured five learning institutions and found the various programs' definition of interior design, interior architecture and architecture to be confusing. This observation has been supported by the recent white paper by IDEC, *Defining Graduate Education in Interior Design*, <http://www.idec.org/conferences/IDECWhitePaperGradfinal.pdf>.

When Laura informed me of her decision to leave Perkins+Will/Eva Maddox to pursue her dream to teach interior design, she was shocked to hear about the deficit of interior design educators and future implications. Like many other practitioners, she was not aware of the serious situation. Her look of surprise turned to a smile when she realized excellent prospects for a teaching position await her when she graduates.

We need to recruit more professional talent, such as Laura Smith, to teach the future generations of interior designers. Our profession depends upon it. We applaud Laura for dedicating two years of her life and sacrificing remuneration during this time with aspirations of teaching interior design. Furthermore, she may not volunteer it, but she is personally financing the cost of her graduate school and expenses.

Our industry needs to step in and help... We must provide incentives and financial support to make this dream a reality for practitioners returning to school to teach interior design. Kimball Office has provided a leadership position through funding resolution. We need for our entire industry including interior design firms, manufacturers and learning institutions to come together and explore ways to relieve the burden from practitioners returning to school to teach. Please contact Jeffrey Beachum at IDEC, jbeachum@IDEC.org or Georgy Olivieri, Golivieri03@aol.com with your ideas.