

ENTERING DESIGN EDUCATION

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THE PROBLEM

In design education today a “perfect storm” is brewing: record enrollments in interior design programs and documented need for qualified design educators, against the looming retirement of mass numbers of Baby Boomer educators. The next five years will see a steady increase in faculty retirements, as this generation starts to hit the magic age of 62 this year. Graduate programs across North America cannot begin to turn out the sufficient number of new faculty that will be needed to fill the ranks of the newly retired. How then and by whom can these positions be filled?

The following comments taken from a 2007 Survey on Faculty Salaries/Hiring by the **Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC)** illustrate the severity of the problem:

Two faculty retired. It took 2 years to replace them and we still need two more. One of those we advertised last year, no success. Our Dean has just now added another position.

Accepted candidates with architecture and art degrees in the past because not enough candidates with higher degrees in ID.

A couple of years ago, we searched for 3 years to fill the open slot but did so about a year ago, now we have another full time ID position opening.

Finding qualified Interior Designers with a Master's Degree is the problem.

We have been searching for two years to fill a full-time position.

Two positions were open three years ago; only six people applied, all architects.

We did three searches. It took three years to successfully hire someone -- we had to place recent graduates from our graduate program in as term faculty until the position could be filled by a much more qualified employee.

Why, you might add, should I be concerned with a problem that seems to be an issue just with higher education? There is potential for a huge trickle down effect that could severely and negatively impact the greater profession and business of design. Not enough educators would result in lowering the number of students who could be graduated in design. This would result in insufficient numbers of new practitioners (designers will also be retiring!) Not enough designers to meet client needs and specify product could cripple industry. No one will come out a winner.

SEEKING A SOLUTION

Leadership in IDEC recognized this coming problem several years ago. During NEOCON 2007, IDEC helped facilitate (with the support of Kimball Office) a panel of educators and practitioners to discuss the shortage of interior design educators. The discussion was rich and resulted in the formation of a Task Force to further address this critical issue. Kimball Office responded by pledging financial support to provide continued momentum to address the declining pool of educators.

The purpose of the Kimball Office Working Group on Sustaining the Future of Interior Design Education is to identify strategies to promote design education as a career choice (mid to long-range solutions) and mechanisms by which the pool of qualified interior design educators can be increased. The group consists of: **Nila R. Leiserowitz**, Managing Director of Gensler; **Eileen E. Jones**, Principal and National Discipline Leader of Perkins + Will; **Joy H. Dohr**, Professor Emerita in Design Studies, University of Wisconsin; **Denise Guerin**, Professor of Interior Design, University of Minnesota; and **Andrew Furman**, Assistant Professor of Interior Design at Ryerson University, Toronto. The Kimball Office Working Group will convene for a two to three day session during the summer/fall of 2008 in order to define creative strategies to help alleviate this problem.

But it doesn't take a task force to realize that one very viable solution to this impending problem is **to seek new faculty from the ranks of current design practitioners**. While this solution in theory is ideal, it is fraught with problems of its own:

1. Despite an acknowledged down economy, the design profession has not seen a noticeable downturn in business (certainly not enough for numbers of current practitioners to seek alternative employment... for example: design education!) There is clearly no compelling need to switch careers at this moment.
2. Institutions of higher education generally require the minimum of a master's degree in order to teach. The profession of interior design only requires a bachelor's degree in order to become licensed in certain jurisdictions. Thus, there is not a large current pool of practicing designers capable of assuming university teaching positions. (This could be contrasted to the profession of architecture, where many current practitioners already hold Master of Architecture (M. Arch) degrees. The profession of architecture has also endorsed the master's degree as the coming "First Professional" degree, making all future graduates/ practitioners capable of entering a career in higher education.)

REQUIREMENTS FOR ENTERING DESIGN EDUCATION

A goal of this presentation is to outline the basic requirements of entering design education and to make clear the very positive benefits of a career in design education. It is important to understand the basics of how higher education works (in terms of an education career) and what is, and is not, valued in this endeavor.

Degree Requirements

The following discussion will deal in generalities about higher education. In this arena particularly, there are always exceptions to every rule. Higher education is broken down into public and private institutions. These in turn are broken down into 2-year (community and technical colleges), 4-year (granting undergraduate degrees) and research institutions (granting undergraduate and graduate degrees.)

Depending on the accrediting body of the institution, differing minimal degree requirements are found. Private institutions and 2-year colleges are more likely to be able to utilize full-time faculty with just a bachelor's degree in their teaching subject area. These often do not utilize a system of tenure and promotion (described below) but rely on term or annual contracts. 4-year and research institutions generally require a minimum of a master's degree. Many institutions require a minimum of a PhD. There is even a hierarchy of acceptance amongst graduate degrees:

Least accepted: **MS** (Master of Science)

Sometimes accepted: **MA** (Master of Arts)

Generally accepted: **MFA** (Master of Fine Arts), **M. Arch** (Master of Architecture)

Always accepted: **PhD** (Doctor of Philosophy)

A new degree **MID** (Master of Interior Design) is beginning to be conferred, but there has not been a consensus yet on what exactly the degree requirements are (and thus no consensus as to the acceptance of this degree across institutions seeking new faculty.) IDEC has published a position paper on "Graduate Education" that addresses the need to define this new degree with agreed upon standards (essentially creating a research-based design degree not unlike an M. Arch.)

Tenure and Promotion

Most public and private research institutions hire faculty under a "tenure and promotion system" (rather than on annual contracts.) Within this system faculty are given rank and promoted accordingly. Rank from lowest to highest would be: instructor, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor.

Within this system, new faculty generally have six years to prove their worth to the program, the department, the college and the institution in either research capability (the old "publish or perish") or creative scholarship (winning peer evaluated design competitions or exhibit entry.) The "peer evaluation" is the critical factor. Often a regional, national or international reputation must be documented. If tenure is granted, the faculty member has a position until retirement (providing certain standards are maintained and evidence of research and/or creative scholarship continues.) If tenure is NOT granted, the faculty member must leave the institution (often granted a seventh year to make appropriate arrangements.) The process involved is almost always rigorous and stressful, but positive results are extremely rewarding.

WHY ENTER DESIGN EDUCATION

Without doubt, one very clear reason to go into design education is the satisfaction of helping develop the next generation of design practitioners. An educator can make such a dramatic change in students' lives and it is the rare interior designer who does not already value positive interaction between people.

Another reason is the employment security of an educator. With stable or rising student enrollments, faculty needs are a constant, even for part-time or non-tenure track faculty. Tenure (as described above) provides an extremely stable employment future. Education is traditionally immune to the harshest realities of economic downturns (when the most people are out of work, student enrollments are never higher!)

A common misperception is that faculty salaries are uniformly low. While there certainly are examples of this present, the IDEC Salary Survey showed that 42% of the respondents found **Instructor** (generally non-tenure track) salaries at \$31-40,000 and another 8% at \$41-50,000. **Assistant Professor** (beginning tenure track) came in with 54% naming a \$41-50,000 salary and another 26% saying \$51-60,000. One must remember that the standard contract time is nine months. Many faculty continue teaching during the summer to earn more money (while some take this time for intensive research/creative scholarship or just much needed down time.)

Many designers will acknowledge that they have been very fortunate in their career path. Becoming a design educator is one way to "give back" for the greater good of the profession. The very best design educator is one who not only has the degree requirements, but also has solid practice experience, is an NCIDQ certificate holder, and perhaps has been involved with one of the professional organizations working to further the profession. Design education is an excellent way to spend one's last productive income-earning years (and clearly a good way to remain active and productive into early retirement.)

HOW TO GET STARTED

The best way to "test the waters" in education is to seek part-time employment as an adjunct instructor at an institution of higher education. Salaries vary (as does the experience.) Urban areas provide more possibilities for teaching night courses (allowing one to work in practice full time and also teach.) In larger cities there are any number of people who are full time adjuncts (teaching multiple courses at numerous institutions during the week.) As a comment from the IDEC Salary Survey said, "*We are always looking for adding to our adjunct pool due to the fact that most are practicing designers and their schedules vary from term to term.*"

Call your local design program to see if there are opportunities to volunteer as a student mentor or project juror. Many programs also have Advisory Boards that allow service to the program but also increase the learning curve of the member as to the potentials within design education. Providing internships also gets contact with the current generation of college design students.

If you do not already hold a master's degree (as most practitioners do not), it would help to do some research as to the nearest location where an advanced degree in design can be secured. Most information (as well as application) can be found online. Everyone does not live within commuting distance to such an institution, but there are several distance learning programs up and running and numerous others in development.

Resources

Check the web pages of **IDEC** at www.idec.org and the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) at www.accredit-id.org. Here you will find further information on design education and locations of accredited design programs. Be on the lookout for information and opportunities from the **Kimball Office Working Group** on Sustaining the Future of Interior Design Education. You can become a part of the solution to this very compelling problem!