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Defining Graduate Education in Interior Design

As it exists today, interior design graduate education is defined by various degrees with different missions, professional content, research content, degree nomenclature, accredited status, credit hour requirements, and curricular focus. This creates a lack of clarity for the consuming public and especially for institutions of higher education that must define minimum requirements for its faculty hires. It is incumbent on the profession, as it continues to evolve, to clarify the role of graduate education and to specifically define the attributes of the terminal master's degree. It is therefore proposed that the "terminal master's degree in Interior Design" be defined:

> *1. to include both professional design content and research methods, and to promote the integration of research into the design process*
>
> *2. to qualify as the terminal "professional" teaching degree by virtue of this integration—distinct from, but an equivalent alternative to, the Ph.D.*
>
> *3. to qualify as the terminal practice degree in the discipline (although it need not preempt the professional and accredited baccalaureate).*
>
> *4. to offer a specified degree name, herein recommended to be the Master of Interior Design (MID), as a way of clarifying the degree to the consuming public*
>
> *5. to be a degree accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA) and meeting standards consistent with advanced level study, thus insuring to the consuming public that the degree is appropriately rigorous and meets the standards set by the profession*

Background

In conjunction with the 2006 annual international meeting of the Interior Design Educators Council (IDEC), President Eric Wiedegreen convened a committee of IDEC members to address, in the form of a white paper, "the value of the master's degree in the context of interior design education." A specific charge was to look at the definition and interpretation of the "terminal master's degree" and how this may impact a perceived shortage of qualified interior design educators. The committee concurred that a lack of qualified interior design educators does in fact exist, and that this may be impacted by several factors including:

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1) a lack of clarity surrounding what constitutes the terminal teaching master's degree, contributing to a mismatch between program needs and applicant abilities in the job search, application, and hiring process.

2) a lack of clarity surrounding what constitutes the terminal teaching master's degree, causing several hiring institutions not to accept certain master's degrees as "terminal" and thus reducing the pool of qualified applicants.

3) an inability for professionally qualified interior designers to pursue teaching opportunities because their degree, which may be first-professional, is at the baccalaureate level.

Interior Design Education: A Current Assessment
Interior design education is best defined and evaluated at the undergraduate level. The Council for Interior Design Accreditation (CIDA; formerly FIDER) recognizes the baccalaureate degree as the benchmark standard for a professional interior design education. It stipulates the bachelor's degree, including at least 30 semester credit hours of liberal arts and sciences, as the minimum requirement for accreditation. Prior to 2000, "pre-professional" accreditation, requiring a minimum of 60 semester credit hours, was possible for two- and three-year programs. Interior design programs are also accredited through other organizations. The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) may accredit those programs centered in art, and the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB) may accredit those programs housed in architecture. In both cases, these programs are part of a broader cluster of art or architecture programs.

Post-professional education in interior design is possible at the master's level or at the doctoral level. The profession recognizes both the Ph.D. and master's degree as "terminal teaching degrees," but the degree offerings are varied and distinct. Although Ph.D. programs in interior design exist, none are specifically housed in departments of interior design. Instead, Ph.D. programs are associated with Human Ecology, Environmental Design, or Sociology, so the degrees earned relate to interior design, yet are distinct. A 1993 IDEC white paper titled Appointment, Tenure, and Promotion establishes the master's as the "terminal degree for interior design faculty." Yet the variety of master's degrees offered often makes it suspect as an equivalent terminal degree, especially if it is not already understood by the institution as "terminal professional" (for example the MFA).

Existing master's programs vary based on the following characteristics:

1. Nomenclature
The diversity of degree offerings at the master's level is especially evidenced by degree nomenclature. Interior design programs housed in human ecology, family studies, or home economics historically offer the Master of Arts (MA) or Master of Science (MS). This is typically understood as leading to the Ph.D., but can also be positioned as the

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terminal teaching degree, especially if it is also "first-professional." Programs housed in art schools most commonly offer the Master of Fine Arts (MFA) degree. The MFA *is* understood as the terminal degree in the field for college level teaching. In schools of architecture, the Master of Architecture (MArch) degree is likewise the terminal degree for college level teaching, and it is also a first professional degree (along with the five-year Bachelor of Architecture). In limited cases, the Master of Interior Design (MID) degree is offered, and it may be positioned as the terminal degree. As a new(er) degree, the MID is not well understood in the academy and its status as a terminal teaching degree is unclear.

2. Post-professional/first-professional

The majority of master's degree level programs (especially those that offer an MA or MS) are "post-professional," and typically focus on beginning research methods, design research, and possibly teaching methods. Generally, the presumption is that students who are accepted to and enter these master's programs have earned a "professional interior design baccalaureate" degree, but this expectation varies from institution to institution. The prerequisite baccalaureate degree may be either from an accredited or non-accredited interior design program. Or, in fact, it may not be from an interior design program at all. The determination of professional competency as a prerequisite for post-professional study is made on a case-by-case basis by each individual program.

A smaller number of master's level programs are "first-professional," recognizing the need to provide professional training for students lacking the undergraduate degree in interior design. Most often, the first-professional degree is offered as an MA or MS, but it is occasionally offered as an MFA or MID. Typically, the curriculum in these programs is a combination of baccalaureate and advanced-level professional studies, and may include some initial exposure to research and teaching. However, because much of the professional content is shared with the baccalaureate level, there is no guarantee that research methods and studio-based design work are integrated. In fact, some first-professional programs provide only professional training and exclude the research component altogether. While this experience may prepare the student for practice, it cannot adequately prepare the graduate for college-level teaching. As with the post-professional master's, professional competency may also be suspect. Students earning the first-professional master's will demonstrate varying degrees of professional skill because, with few exceptions, first-professional interior design graduate programs do not pursue professional accreditation.

Some graduate level master's programs offer *both* post- and first-professional degree tracks. These dual tracks respond to different market needs but may not always be clearly differentiated. When the first-professional degree track requires a "leveling" component and thus a longer time-to-degree, the two tracks can be understood as distinct but integrated. Their termination in a single degree makes sense. When the tracks are commingled, however, the degree (and the abilities of the graduate) is less clear. Currently, there is no way for anyone but the program or the student who graduates from it to clearly identify the actual difference between the two tracks. These

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dual track degrees, once again, provide no clear evidence of professional competency since accreditation, through CIDA, remains optional.

3. Accredited status
As discussed in #2 above, the clarity of graduate degree offerings is further compromised by the fact that professional accreditation is optional for first-professional master's degree programs. Some of these programs pursue, and are granted, CIDA accreditation, but this number is small. Further, the minimum requirements for accreditation at the master's level are identical to those for baccalaureate programs, so there is no expectation for a higher level of achievement or significantly advanced coursework at the graduate level. At present, there is no accreditation available for post-professional master's degree programs in interior design. In post-professional master's programs, the varied expectations for prerequisites in the undergraduate degree contribute to varied levels of professional competency among graduates.

4. Curriculum
Master's degree level programs are equally likely to vary in terms of their curricular content or emphasis. They offer varying degrees of professional training, research training, teaching methods (and teaching experience), and exposure to the liberal arts. By default, they also evidence bias toward the unit in which they're housed (Human Ecology, Art, Architecture), thus offering varying exposure to the behavioral sciences, to the studio arts, or to architecture. Additionally, the time-to-degree varies between programs, typically between one and three years. This again is based on specific program requirements or on an assessment of entering student competency.

This variety in program attributes confirms that interior design graduate education is driven as much by market need as by any consistent set of expectations developed by the profession or enforced through the accreditation process. When the master's degree is defined as the terminal degree for teaching, this lack of clarity is especially problematic.

The "Terminal" Degree as Defined by the Academy
The plurality of degree offerings at the graduate level is complicated by institutional standards for what constitutes the terminal degree. Historically, the Ph.D. is established as the benchmark degree for college-level teaching, signifying the highest level of academic achievement in the field and defined by the creation of new knowledge through research. Institutional pressure thus exists to signify the Ph.D. as a minimum requirement in faculty searches. Individuals targeting academic careers understand this and will often pursue this degree.

The Ph.D. is characterized by a deeper knowledge, typically within a more focused content area. Where deeper knowledge is required (teaching at the graduate level or teaching in support areas such as human factors or history), the Ph.D. will likely be perceived to be of higher value. However, since the Ph.D., as well as prerequisite degrees, is frequently earned in disciplines related to, but distinct from, interior design,

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there is no guarantee that the Ph.D. candidate demonstrates a more holistic competency in design practice.

For this reason, the master's degree is commonly accepted by the academy as an alternative to the Ph.D. *in professional programs*. The MFA, MArch, Master of Furniture Design, Master of Historic Preservation, and Master of Landscape Architecture are well established examples of professional degrees that are grounded in design practice and recognized by the academy as "equivalent terminal." Unlike the Ph.D., these professional master's degrees promote expertise in design and design process that, by definition, requires broad knowledge across a range of content areas. Design decisions are informed by (and evaluated against) this broad knowledge. Typically, these professional master's programs provide initial exposure to research experiences as well as classroom teaching. A thesis experience that promotes the concept of "evidence-based design" and that integrates research into the design process is common.

The Need for the Terminal Master's Degree in Interior Design
Interior design programs will often seek master's-qualified candidates who possess strong design ability and an understanding of issues directly related to design practice. Professional practice experience is frequently a priority in search descriptions as a complement to the professional degree. This more comprehensive design ability is valuable to undergraduate teaching and to the professional curriculum, both of which comprise the majority of teaching positions in interior design. It is especially relevant to teaching in the design studio courses, where broad knowledge must be synthesized into students' design projects. And it is relevant to small teaching faculties (also prevalent in the discipline) where teachers must be able to cover multiple courses and content.

Herein lies the fundamental point of confusion. There is no clear definition in the interior design discipline of what constitutes the professional and terminal master's degree, and how this is distinguished from master's programs that lead to the Ph.D. Such a definition has not been adopted, or promoted, by any of the various professional organizations, or formalized through the accreditation process. While the diversity of master's level degrees is arguably healthy, an agreed-to definition of the "professional" master's is critical because this is established as the alternative to the Ph.D. as terminal in the discipline. The profusion of graduate degrees makes it unclear which degrees do and which do not qualify as terminal. MA and MS degrees are frequently viewed as steppingstones to the Ph.D. (and thus not terminal), and the MFA and MArch, while understood as equivalent terminal degrees, may represent expertise from outside the discipline.

As a result, institutions are able to develop different interpretations for what constitutes the terminal teaching degree and to disqualify some master's degrees positioned as terminal. This underscores the need for a clearly identified master's degree track, grounded in evidence-based design practice, and positioned as an equivalent alternative to the Ph.D.

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A Proposed Definition
A terminal master's degree in interior design, then, must be grounded *both* in design practice and in research. If it is purely a post-professional research-oriented degree, then it is not adequately distinguished from the Ph.D. and will not be viewed as comparatively rigorous. Likewise, if it is a practice-based degree only, disconnected from research and evidence-based design, then it is not appropriately critical and does not prepare the graduate for college level teaching. *By placing the design process at the core of the curriculum and by allowing student-directed research to inform this process, the master's degree is positioned as distinct from the Ph.D. but as providing equivalent value.* Design educators have long argued the need to integrate evidence-based research into the design process, and such a blended degree will do this.

Further, this type of integrated master's degree recognizes differing market needs. Students coming from other undergraduate majors could still pursue the degree and gain appropriate professional content, likely with a somewhat longer time-to-degree. Students with undergraduate degrees in interior design, and especially those bringing extensive practice backgrounds, could test out of some prerequisite professional coursework and focus instead on research and educational methods content needed for college-level teaching. As the accepted professional master's, such a degree would need to be appropriately flexible to cater to a variety of students with differing backgrounds and experiences.

It may not be enough, though, to define the terminal master's in a conceptual sense; it must also have a clear identity. One way to provide this identity is to prescribe a degree name. The MA and MS are *not* obvious choices here, given that these are historically understood as degrees earned in route to the Ph.D. Perhaps the degree that provides the most identity is the MID, given its specific reference to "interior design." Like the Master of Architecture, it is very clear. It is also a relatively new degree name and thus able to be defined by the profession. Since IDEC currently recognizes the MA and MS as terminal teaching degrees, it would be important to "grandfather-in" previously earned degrees and to clearly communicate this to hiring institutions. Similarly, an adequate grace period would be necessary in order to allow programs to revise, if they so chose, program content and degree name.

Although a commonly understood degree name will provide identity, perhaps the only way to insure conformance with the intent of the professional master's is to require accreditation of this degree, likely through CIDA. This accreditation would need to recognize the "value-added" above and beyond the baccalaureate, so the guidelines would be more rigorous. These guidelines would clearly communicate the value of the professional master's degree as a "terminal teaching degree," qualifying graduates for entry-level teaching positions, as well as a "terminal practice degree," qualifying graduates for entry-level practice. It is important to point out that more stringent accreditation requirements would not be driven by the accrediting organization, but rather would be created in response to demands by professional organizations, testing and regulatory agencies, and employers. Accreditation guidelines would also regulate

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"time to degree." Existing one-year master's degrees (associated with "4+1" programs) might need to increase the number of total required credit hours.

Also, this new accreditation level need not impact existing accreditation of baccalaureate programs, at least at this time. Programs offering degrees at both levels could seek dual accreditation through a single application process. Over time, however, redefinition of the professional master's degree as the sole terminal teaching and practice degree would clarify the degree track and create a degree identity in much the same way that the shift to baccalaureate-level accreditation did in 2000.

Arguments for the "First Professional" Master's

If the master's degree in interior design were to be defined, over time, as *first professional* (meaning that accreditation would no longer occur at the baccalaureate level), this would add clarity to the degree track and create degree identity at the graduate level. But there are other advantages. Such a shift also responds to increasing complexity in the profession and in the interior design knowledge base. Graduate-level study can emphasize a more critical and research-driven design, and a greater depth of study. Further, by shifting some professional content to the graduate level, a greater exposure to liberal studies and to more general design study is possible at the baccalaureate level.

Another benefit of shifting first professional accreditation to the master's level is that this would have a significant and immediate impact on the pool of qualified college-level educators. A consistent observation of committee members was that a critical mass of experienced and qualified practitioners are currently *not* eligible to pursue full-time teaching at a later point in their careers because the first-professional accredited degree is defined at the baccalaureate level. By mid-career, when these practicing interior designers might consider a shift into teaching, they are not qualified to do so. Returning for post-graduate study is an option, but is often impractical due to family obligations, or constraints related to location or finances.

If, on the other hand, the first-professional accredited degree were defined at the master's level, a critical mass of students interested in *practice* would pursue the master's degree initially and therefore would also become eligible for teaching at a later point in their career. Again, such a shift could only occur gradually over time, but it would bring the academic and professional tracks more in-line, and would have significant impact on the pool of available educators.

Finally, a shift to first professional graduate education would place interior design and architectural education on a more equal footing by equating their career tracks. This would counter arguments in the licensing arena that interior design education is not adequately extensive, and would positively impact efforts to secure interior design practice acts. It is important to point out that the bachelor's degree in architecture, while pre-professional, supports numerous practice opportunities. A pre-professional bachelor's degree in interior design would do the same.

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<u>A Charge to the Profession</u>
While we may debate its specific characteristics, a master's degree in interior design that is clearly defined and universally recognized by the academy as "terminal in the field" can help to insure that design educators are adequately qualified for college level teaching, and that those wishing to teach have a clear understanding of the qualifications needed for a teaching career. It is therefore incumbent on the various allied professional organizations in interior design to develop and agree to a definition of what constitutes the terminal master's degree, in contrast to other master's degrees in the discipline. IDEC, as the educational arm of the profession, can and should take the lead in this effort. A conceptual definition is articulated herein by this committee (summarized in the introductory position statement), and offered as a starting point in the discussion. Such a definition must specifically address degree nomenclature and accreditation, as well as transition sequence and target deadlines. Once agreed to, this definition should be clearly articulated to all constituencies, especially to higher education, and programs should be regulated as appropriate to insure conformance with degree expectations. By so doing, this will add clarity to the academic career path, recognize increased complexity in the discipline, and ultimately increase the pool of qualified design educators.