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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 zerohedge.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?

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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