

This is an essay written by legendary designer, educator and AIGA medalist Katherine McCoy. [Click here to learn more about Katherine.](#)

With Katherine's permission we are republishing this essay because it makes some very key philosophical points in regard to design certification and design education that are as relevant today as they were 13 years ago, when this was written. This essay was part of Katherine's influential discourse during the late 1980s and 1990s in regard to a movement to upgrade professional graphic-design education and establish an accurate definition of professional graphic design.

In response to Katherine's leadership, the design profession has made a handful of improvements. We still have some work ahead of us, but these changes illustrate what can happen when we work together for the benefit of our profession.

- Since this essay was written, the following issues have been addressed:
 - AIGA developed undergraduate, graduate and doctoral school accreditation with NASAD, and curricular standards were adopted. This has had a significant positive impact on the quality of graphic design education in the United States
- The number of more high-quality graduate programs of graphic design has grown significantly and many more college-level educators hold high-quality graduate degrees.
- AIGA has developed and published an excellent professional definition for graphic design, so there is less confusion about what the profession is.
- The AIGA has had some success with the Department of Labor. The U.S. Department of Labor's *Occupational Outlook Handbook* has an improved description of graphic design, although not as good as it could be. [Click here to read the current definition.](#)
- The essay's reference to multimedia is outdated. Today multimedia is more specifically referred to as interactive media, interaction design, information architecture, time-based media or motion graphics.

EDUCATION AND PROFESSIONALISM OR WHAT'S WRONG WITH GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION?

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We refer to ourselves as professionals all the time. And we want our clients to respect us as professionals.

But the US government sees us differently. The Department of Labor publishes the Occupational Outlook Handbook, the legal source that defines the nature of graphic design in this country. There is no section on "graphic designers" in this book. "Graphic artists" are under the category of VISUAL ARTISTS, parallel to "Fine artists". There is also a section on DESIGNERS which includes industrial designers, interior designers, furniture designers, fashion and textile designers, and even floral designers. But apparently we aren't designers. On page 191 of the 1996 edition the book says, "Graphic artists use a variety of print, electronic, and film media to create art that meets a client's needs." This is distinguished from fine artists who "sell their works to stores, commercial art galleries, and museums, or directly to collectors." In the section on training requirements, it states "demonstrated ability and appropriate training or other qualifications are needed for success. Evidence of appropriate talent and skill, displayed in an artist's portfolio, is an important factor used by art and design directors in deciding whether to hire or contract out work to an artist."

The portfolio is the most important factor in getting a job, and this book implies that a person with a good portfolio but no education could succeed in the graphic arts. They do note that, more often, "Assembling a successful portfolio requires skills generally developed in a post-secondary art or design program, such as a bachelor's degree program in fine art, graphic design or visual communications."

The goal of a college education here seems to be the production of a good portfolio. Now, I realize many of our field would probably agree with that. But this view of graphic design and design education neglects the conceptual side of our field. And it's the conceptual

elements of design-- research, analysis, problem-solving, innovation-- that are what make us competitive in an increasingly sophisticated marketplace and effective with a very diverse range of audiences.

This description of our field's educational requirements is very muddled, cobbled together and modified over the years. Odd that a student would go to school in graphic design to become a "graphic artist". But the handbook is very clear when it says that industrial design "requires a bachelor's degree," and that a professional degree in architecture is necessary.

What is wrong with this picture? Our name, first of all, is totally confused. The government does not know what our name is-- but then we do not either. Visual communications, visual design, communications design, graphic design, advertising design, commercial art and layout are just a few of the names we hear. The Department of Labor's description of our practice is terribly naive and superficial, stressing manual skills and intuition. Graphic design is defined as the production of a decorative commodity rather than a professional service. Education is underplayed and the emphasis is the development of the skills and the "hardware" of a designer-- the portfolio.

Contrasted to this are the Handbook's descriptions of architecture and industrial design-- these read beautifully. They are good, clear, accurate descriptions of these fields. There is no reason that graphic design's description cannot be better. In reality graphic design professionals have very high expectations of entry level designers and consider a four-year degree the basic requirement to enter the profession. The vast majority of AIGA and ACD members under 50 (postwar babies) have at least a four-year degree. But none of our professional organizations have effectively insisted that the Department of Labor make an accurate description of graphic design. Architecture and industrial design's professional organizations have established relationships with the Department of Labor and have seen to it that good descriptions are published.

Because this description does not stress professional services, intellectual activity or higher education, the government is reluctant to recognize graphic design as a profession. They see us as a mixture of tradesmen, technicians, craftsmen and hobbyists. The Department of Labor recognizes a 4-year degree as a basic requirement to be considered a professional. A kindergarten teacher is a professional in the eyes of the government, but we are not.

Why is this important? It was important to Colin Forbes of Pentagram when he applied for his green card 15 years ago. He had to masquerade as an industrial designer to be considered a professional under US immigration law. He asked me to write him a reference letter when I was president of the IDSA to convince US Immigration that because he engaged in package design, he was an industrial designer and therefore a professional.

I know many educators around the country are frustrated when our outstanding foreign graduates struggle for permission to practice in the US. If it wasn't such a painful memory for the current president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts-- a highly celebrated graphic designer-- we could ask her to tell the sad tale of her difficult experience obtaining a work permit.

The Occupational Outlook Handbook is in every high school library and every public library in the US. This is the career reference for high school counselors. It is the main source for potential students of graphic design to learn about our field.

But the problem with the government's confused definition of graphic design goes deeper than that-- it reflects our own confusion and failure to establish standards of excellence beyond the beauty pageants in the magazines. It promotes the idea that talent alone is sufficient-- that only those without enough talent have to go to school to become a graphic designer. There is very little mention of the conceptual aspects of graphic design-- the software of our profession, the intellectual process that distinguishes design from a craft or trade.

The Department of Labor's casual attitude towards graphic design education is not shared by graphic design professionals. It's from professionals that we hear the most complaints about design education.

How often do we hear our colleagues lament the sorry state of the entry level applicants they interview for design staff positions? This familiar refrain is sung daily in design offices across the country. Complaints include graduates with weak conceptual skills or poor typography, graduates that can barely write or speak clearly to clients, graduates with no grasp of business practices and unrealistic expectations of the field. But graphic design education has become far more professional in the past fifteen years and a number of graphic design schools have achieved real excellence.

So why the continuing lack of professionalism in so many entry level college graduates from design programs? The answer lies in a graphic design educational community totally out of control. The number of schools has grown wildly in response to societal change and a technological communications revolution. We have a huge number of graphic design programs, doubling over the past 10 years, with rapidly growing enrollments. A tidal wave of vocationally-minded college students see graphic design as a practical way to apply their visual arts talents in a rewarding career. University art departments are eager for graphic design programs to build their enrollments, whether they are prepared or not. Most of these art departments are openly using graphic design programs as cash cows to support fine arts programs with shrinking enrollments. As a result, entrenched fine arts faculty are teaching graphic design in many university design programs. These same fine artists generally see graphic design as simply the commercial application of fine art principles and typically hold very negative attitudes towards design, as well as being woefully unequipped to teach the discipline. Equally problematic are the start-up graphic design programs that hire one fresh-out-of-graduate-school MFA with no professional experience to teach an entire graphic design program.

Many university programs offer a graduate degree in graphic design as well. Sadly, most of these programs are remedial in nature with no faculty dedicated solely to graduate study,

and pursue no in-depth research or experimentation. Many of our country's graduate students in graphic design are simply staying on in school for two more years to make up for what they failed to get in their insufficient undergraduate experiences.

In addition, there are over 1,500 2-year programs also claiming to teach "graphic design", promoting the idea that a graphic design education can be accomplished in two years. In reality these programs teach only software skills and graphic arts techniques. The graphic design profession must make it clear that at least a four year degree is necessary for a professional base of preparation. "Graphic arts technology" would be a more correct term for 2-year programs.

The new field of multimedia complicates the situation still further. Programs are popping up everywhere in universities, as well as 2-year schools-- in computer science, in communications, in technical writing, in film, in photography, in journalism. Yet multimedia is visual communications design, adding sound, motion and interaction design to our traditional design elements. Our field will quickly lose our legitimate claim to expertise in multimedia if we do not take control of its education.

The result is a great number of entry level graduates unprepared to compete in a very rigorous field. The drop-out rate is extremely high in the first years after graduation, and studios find few graduates prepared for the responsibilities and realities of professional practice.

Over 2,000 schools in the United States claim to teach graphic design as an area of emphasis. This includes community colleges and two-year art schools. In professional practice, there are fewer than 10,000 graphic designers in our professional organizations. So we have 2,000 plus schools for just 10,000 professionals comprising the core for our field.

In contrast, landscape architecture has 12,000 practicing members in their professional organization, and they have only 56 accredited schools in the entire US Yet these schools

supply their field with a sufficient number of landscape architecture graduates to keep the discipline advancing on a high level. Interior designers have 30,000 certified professionals and have 116 accredited schools. Architecture has 56,000 either registered or in the track to become registered architects, and they have 120 schools in the entire country. In the United States, there are 900,000 licensed attorneys. Do you know how many schools they have? 180.

Why does graphic design need 2,000 schools? The answer is that we do not. We need fewer, bigger and better design programs. In fact there is an inverse relationship between the number of professional schools and the quality of those schools-- the fewer the schools, the better the schools.

Why are fewer schools better? Fewer programs would allow us to concentrate our resources into larger and more comprehensive programs that achieve a critical mass in each program. This allows highly qualified faculty to focus in-depth on their particular area of specialization, and more extensive facilities and resources available to students. It is time for us to insist on no more one-faculty or two-faculty programs, of which there are hundreds.

Does each state really need more than one state university graphic design program, one regional university program, and one private art or technical university program? Even with this, the United States would have 150 graphic design schools. Where did we get the idea that a prospective student should have to drive no further than an hour from their birthplace to receive a professional graphic design education? This is certainly not the case in any of the other design professions.

How can we reduce the numbers of schools and improve the quality of our education? Accreditation is a process used successfully by all the other design professions to determine which schools are qualified to offer programs and to control the number of programs. In addition, there are mechanisms to support excellence, as well as minimum standards.

Graphic design needs to establish these baselines and minimum standards of professional practice and education. In a sense, we need to draw a circle around the discipline to clarify what is and what is not quality graphic design. Amazingly enough, this is a controversial statement. Some designers have a strong suspicion of formalizing either the practice or the education of graphic design. Some find the idea elitist and exclusionary. Some fear that in raising the baseline, we may eliminate the peaks. And that by insisting on-- or even just advocating-- a quality education as preparation for design practice, we will somehow exclude our geniuses and individualists. And some designers fear that national school accreditation standards would result in boring predictability. But there are workable methods to include the exceptional exceptions while excluding the unqualified. Other professions do this very effectively.

Remember that graphic design is in the midst of a life cycle, a state of evolution. In the United States after World War II, we were in our infancy, gaining the first traits of professionalism. At that time there were virtually no educational programs.

Early graphic designers in the 20th century through the 1950s were generally trained in neighboring disciplines, often fine arts, and applied their past experiences to this new field of advertising design and "commercial art". Their emphasis was on the sender component of the communications equation of sender- message- receiver. They were dedicated to advancing the clients' sales goals and using the tools of fine art based on self-expression and intuition-- the big idea, aha! school of design. As the field progressed into the 1960s, the lessons of the Bauhaus as developed in Zurich, Basel and Ulm put the emphasis on the message, the center component of this equation. Functionalism, rationality, and some rudimentary communications theory from semiotics were applied to analyze information content and to structure hierarchies. The result was far clearer and objective communication of messages. As more theory was explored, adapted and absorbed by our field, graphic design has moved on to include the right side of this equation. Post structuralism, reception theory and even market research are helping us understand increasingly diverse and segmented audiences.

I would say that graphic design has moved from infancy in the early 20th century to a vigorous childhood in the 1950s to adolescence-- and some would say a self-absorbed one-- in the 1980s, and now to late adolescence or early adulthood. We're inching toward maturity as a discipline.

But we compare our field with the other design disciplines we look very adolescent, with more to be accomplished to rank as an equal with a field like architecture, for example. We do have a number of excellent schools, a fledgling community of journalists, critics and historians, and many high level professionals. Now it is time to take the final steps towards early maturity-- this includes definition, standards and exclusion.

This is a transitional phrase, as well, rather than an end point. Full maturity of a discipline allows the opportunity to relax some standards and encourage more deviation from established professional norms, something architecture-- which some would describe as "overly mature"-- is challenged to consider. But they have been a discipline since the Renaissance.

There are two formalized steps other professions employ to promote a high level of professional discourse and practice. One is the accreditation of schools, and the other is the licensing or certification of professionals. The latter ranges from voluntary certification to legally-required licensing for professional practice. Lawyers and doctors have some of the most stringent licensing requirements, regulated by state laws. On the other end of the spectrum, interior designers have upgraded their field substantially by offering a voluntary examination to qualify for full professional status in the ASID. In addition, 16 states regulate the use of the title interior designer. This means that only those interior designers that have passed the national interior design licensing exam and have practiced for several years are legally allowed to call themselves interior designers in 16 states-- any others calling themselves interior designers are subject to state fines.

Professions that involve public risk from shoddy practitioners and malpractice, such as

structural engineering and medicine, have the most imperative for licensing. Since graphic design is a less technical and relatively subjective field, a certification test to evaluate a graphic designer's capability could be difficult to develop. After all a falling poster has never killed anyone, although its message might have. But licensing isn't just for the elite or risky professions: a directory of occupational licensing lists over 130 fields ranging from aircraft pilots and accountants to taxi drivers, plumbers, umpires and cosmetologists.

Also, many have asked if it is possible to test objectively for conceptual innovation and aesthetic quality. These seem very subjective. However, methods already exist; the architecture and interior design exams' design sections seem quite effective.

In actuality, any form of legally required licensing for graphic design is highly unlikely in our era of downsizing government and de-regulation. A voluntary self-certification program administered by a professional graphic design organization remains a possible future option.

But let's turn to accreditation of graphic design programs in higher education. Accreditation is a very applicable process to the concerns of excellence in graphic design. And is much more immediately achievable.

Accreditation typically defines baselines for curriculum standards, faculty numbers and qualifications, and facilities and equipment. More specialized design faculty and a generous number of courses create a broader and more balanced professional education. The thoroughly educated student needs to experience so much in undergraduate school: a complete liberal arts and sciences education, art and design history, communications theories, methods of research, analysis and problem-solving, form giving, typography, image-making, drawing, photography, interaction design, multimedia, production technologies, business skills, marketing, sociology and psychology, plus a comfort level with key software programs.

By describing these requirements for the undergraduate level, we would define the boundaries of a basic graphic design education. An initial part of this process is the definition of several paradigms of undergraduate graphic design education that respond to the broad types of design practice. For instance, advertising design, graphic design, multimedia/ interaction design and design planning. The intention is not to make all programs identical.

Once accreditation standards and a process are agreed upon by the participating organizations– the AIGA and the Graphic Design Education Association in conjunction with an organization like the National Association of Schools of Art and Design– graphic design programs will be invited to initiate an accreditation review. This process is extremely useful to the school. The central part is a self-study in which the program defines its goals and how it reaches them. Deficiencies become clear even before the visitation team arrives for an on-site review. Although this might sound a bit brutal, it is actually a valuable tool, providing design faculty effective leverage with their administration as they lobby for better resources. Accreditation standards also give non-qualifying programs goals toward which to strive.

One of the most important offshoots of accreditation will be accurate career information for high school students. AIGA will publish a list of accredited schools to guide prospective students to make an informed choice of school that fits their personal career goals. The situation we have now remains nearly as abysmal as in 1963 when I compared Michigan State's course listings to Pratt's, and could perceive no difference. They read the same on paper– and I went to Michigan State. Today the typical high school student still has little guidance from poorly informed career counselors.

The good news is that at the Spring 1996 AIGA Chapter Retreat in Nashville, AIGA announced a Task Force chaired by Meredith Davis to begin the organization of graphic design education accreditation. Meredith asks, "What sort of long term accreditation structure can we create that will have the flexibility to respond to the evolution of

the field and its diversity of practice? We want to raise the ceiling of curricular and faculty performance, as well as encourage innovation and excellence."

Graphic design is a rapidly growing discipline with a recognized body of history, theory and method. Society is in the middle of a great expansion of communications, and business is increasingly aware that graphic design provides the insights and expertise so necessary to reach audiences in an information revolution. But to hold our own in this era of rapid change and complexity, we must do a better job at educating– and not just training– our new graphic design professionals. Pedagogical shortcuts– apprenticeships and learning "on the job"– are nearly impossible today. Intuition and talent are only raw materials. Education is the key to the insights that stimulate innovation and discipline our thinking. Education teaches us to "know how to know." Professional education is what prepares us for today's incredibly competitive and changing environment.

What are the big questions here? I think I've tipped my hand pretty thoroughly, but each of you should consider these questions for yourself.

Is graphic design a profession? The government doesn't think so. Should it be?

On the other hand, is professionalism an anathema to our traditional core values of intuition, individualism, the artistic maverick? Do we still cherish the romantic notion of the heroic designer, blazing new trails from his garret studio?

Does professionalism dictate a predictable sameness, a uninspired plateau of competency, or a bland lack of passion? Or is professionalism an indicator of a mature discipline?

Is a clear professional identity possible in a time of rapidly changing technologies, contexts and audiences?

Is a college education necessary to become a great graphic designer? Why do we need schools at all? For years we have been hearing– and still do– the proud assertion from a

number of high profile graphic designers, "But I didn't go to school in graphic design!" Can you imagine an attorney, a physician– or even an MBA– proudly disavowing any school affiliation? And how do we explain the success of some non-trained designers?

Does education limit innovation, individuality, diversity and creativity?

In a world of desktop publishing and website design, where anyone with a computer and some software has a "license to design", who is truly a graphic designer? And what is graphic design?

In an era of rapidly evolving media and shifting professional identities, we need, more than ever, to define the core values and the constants of graphic design. Whether it is problem solving, information and persuasion, or the making of meaning– or any number of other possibilities– we urgently need to log this in with the appropriate institutions and the public. Or we are just muttering to ourselves.