Senior Community/University Projects

At the Minneapolis School of Art, graduating Seniors in all departments had to mount a thesis show which was reviewed by the entire faculty from all departments. The show had to be approved by a majority for the student to graduate. Within a year or two, it was apparent to me that Graphic Design graduates were routinely doing the same thing each year; a poster, corporate mark, album cover or some similar work. This bothered me as I felt the work was not particularly challenging and students were not learning much from the show. In 1959, I told the Seniors to go out into the community, to find a non-profit organization that was not using design but needed it who would provide time and expertise to work with a student doing a design demonstration.

Students found projects with the Chamber of Commerce, public television, zoo, an organization promoting people to vote, and other similar clients. Students had to work with people, propose design solutions, make presentations and there were no precedents that they could turn to for imagery. All the work was mounted as an exhibit and clients were invited to an opening. I found the entire experience beneficial for students. The student involvement was also good for the school as it promoted a positive image of the institution participating in community affairs.
Each year there were refinements in how community projects were handled. Instead of each student finding their own client, I searched out several potential clients and contacted them to explore the possibilities. An important consideration was whether we could find outside funding for the project and this was also investigated. One client was chosen and all the students focused on that project. One important incentive for clients was that all work produced by students would be turned over to the sponsoring organization. Students knew that they either had to make duplicates of the work for themselves or make slide records. They usually did the latter. By working with a local non-profit organization, and because whatever we produced would be given to that body, we were in a position to approach local foundations, corporations or relevant organizations for funds to implement the project. We could also go to a variety of local suppliers such as printing establishments, photographic suppliers, typesetting shops or paper houses for donations of services or materials. This permitted students to do design work that they probably could not afford to do on an individual basis.

When we started the procedure of funding community projects, it was necessary to have some kind of prospectus describing the purpose, scope and objectives of the project. I found that it was necessary for me to spend considerable time during the summer months meeting with the client, familiarizing myself with the subject, defining the project structure and setting goals. When the students were ready to begin work on the project, my prospective was distributed as a hand-out. The client would come to school and meet with students or we would go to the client. There would be many questions and much discussion. Some part of the project, such as an identity system or posters, was assigned to every student. Concurrently, students were doing research on the client’s operation and the subject. Students then identified what part of the project they would work on individually, and what part they would work on as a team member. Sometimes we would identify expertise in the community which would be contacted to see if they would work with us on the project. For example, when working with the Kansas City Zoo, we contacted the statistical division at Midwest Research Institute and they assigned one staff member to work with students on preparing and interpreting a statistical survey. On the same project, we hired a young teacher who taught writing composition on campus.
She worked in the studios with students on writing text for their design work. One group of students would be responsible for designing the final exhibition. Sometimes students would define their own area within the project, and most worked on several parts of the project simultaneously.

Each student team elected its leadership who had responsibility to overview work, schedule meetings and coordinate with the other teams. It was interesting to see how the teams were chosen. Initially, the groups were determined by social relationships, but as the work progressed, there was some shifting of students from one group to another based on abilities and skills. In the final hours of one project, I remember hearing one team leader trying to trade two photographers for one typographer.

The community projects were either one or two semesters. Often I would give the initial stages of the project to all students during the first semester, and in the second semester, we would break up into teams. In order to keep students moving, we scheduled work in progress reviews about every four to six weeks where clients and interested parties would come to the school to review progress. Usually we notified newspapers and television stations, and generally they would cover these events. The publicity was good for the client, students and school.

Usually one faculty member would be in charge of the project but all faculty members were used wherever their expertise was appropriate. These community projects resulted in an incredible amount of work, and by the end, the students were exhausted. Near the end of projects when students are working nights and weekends, it is imperative that there be a faculty presence in the studios. Teachers cannot expect students to do this much work without being available themselves. The learning experience for most students was excellent. Most students did not want to work in teams, and when they did, they often argued and fought like brothers and sisters. Many students felt that working as part of a team meant sacrificing individuality and that teachers would not recognize their creative effort and identify their work on the project. Students did not realize that following graduation and working professionally would require abilities to function as a team member on numerous occasions. Team projects were a valuable learning experience.

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Some students ducked responsibilities, others stepped in and picked up the slack. However, when the final show was up, most students were amazed at what they had accomplished collectively. Some students became expert in the project content and continued to pursue it later in their career.

On occasion, we would do a mini-project during the second semester of the Junior year as a means for preparing students to work on the more extensive Senior project. At other times, we might do a course assignment based on a local situation with a non-profit organization.

Over the years, we did the decor for the 1961 International Design Conference at Aspen. We designed and produced all the materials in Minneapolis and twenty students made the trip to Aspen and installed the design work. We worked with the Minnesota State Department of Parks and Recreation. The state wanted to increase tourist traffic at the parks and the system needed to be better identified and promoted. We did a demonstration of how Kansas City, Missouri could use an identity system and make visible all public properties or activities through a coordinated design system. This led to the city developing such a system. At a later date we did the same project for Tempe, Arizona. Again, the proposal was carried through and the city established a Graphic Design Office. The Kansas City Missouri Zoo was a municipal one and its budgets were declining at a time when there was critical need for renovation and new facilities. The students did a project to publicize the zoo, effect a paid admissions and build membership for Friends of the Zoo, a private supporting organization. The student project resulted in a paid admissions which could be used only for improving existing exhibits and building new ones. We did a signing system for a new Children's Zoo in Phoenix, Arizona which was implemented and won a national award. One year we did visual aids for Nelson Elementary School in Minneapolis. Later we designed educational aids for Kenwood School, a demonstration school and Operation Headstart in Kansas City. The year the national poverty programs went into effect we did a large photographic reportage on poverty in Kansas City, Missouri called "On the Other Side of Town."

“Education is measured by what the students can do rather than by what the teacher has done.”

- Rob Roy Kelly
When I began to teach at universities, it seemed plausible that projects conceived within the university might be similar to community projects. A special problem for Graphic Design within the university is that it is identified with the Art Department.

As such, design is often viewed by administrators and many other segments of university as being a relatively unimportant field of study. University attitudes toward art and design range from it being frivolous, to not understanding art or design or being dubious of its role in the university. Art Department generally have the lowest faculty salaries, the worst space and lowest operating budgets.

My strategy was to identify activities in the university where design would be helpful and appropriate. With the recent emphasis on research, there were numerous opportunities for students to bring their expertise to bear on various research projects, and at the same time, we could create a more favorable impression of Graphic Design within the university as an educational program. We could build respect for Graphic Design among our colleagues and with administration.

One of the best examples of this was at Carnegie Mellon University. The university had just established a Robotics Institute with a substantial grant from Westinghouse. We met with the Director of the robotics program and he was agreeable to the project. The project was a demonstration of how Graphic Design could further the objectives of the new Institute. Some of the goals of the institute were:

1. To recruit the brightest graduate students from other schools.
2. To create an identity for the institute.
3. To solicit industrial membership.
4. The research goals were to use robots in situations dangerous to people, robots with sensory capabilities, robots to do jobs that were repetitious and tedious for humans.

The students designed materials such as a map of robotic activities as they were scattered over campus, a mark for the institute, a bulletin which would publish research reports, a plaque for industrial members, a signing system, posters for recruitment of graduate students, a catalogue of graduate studies in robotics, annual reports and promotional materials.

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The students planned and installed an exhibition of their work and arranged for members of the Westinghouse Design Offices to speak about the value of design. The program was directed toward the Robotics Institute staff and university administrators. It was a well conceived and executed project but the Robotics Institute did not use any of the materials. Carnegie Mellon University proved to be the least receptive of any clients I worked with on student projects. At Arizona State University we were extensively involved with the Anthropology Department, and in particular, Dr. Charles Redman. Students designed exhibits, newsletters, and went on field trips to do photographic documentation at various digs. It was beneficial for design students and I think they enjoyed the involvement. Dr. Redman seemed to relish working with Graphic Design students. He was a stimulating and exciting individual for our students. I found that Graphic Design students collaborating with people in other disciplines to be broadening, and it most certainly expand ed their educational horizons. Using their knowledge and skills in Graphic Design as a base to enter into, or relate to, other fields was extremely effective as an educational practice.

I think there is much to gain from similar university projects in terms of student educational experiences and promoting design within the institution. Graphic Design workshops accomplish some of the same goals by doing a variety of work for various clients in the university. However, they rarely get into the same depth as an entire Senior class working on a university project.

For portfolios, most students would show slides of an entire project and then identify their contributions to the project. These materials were so different from what most interviewers saw in student portfolios that it elicited considerable discussion. Often the interviewer would ask other members of the firm to come and look at the slides. Because the projects required teamwork, dealt with clients and involved practical solutions, most inter viewers were favorably impressed.

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“There is a curious perversity affecting American education which is best described as governing bodies attaching greater importance to the institutional operation than to its mission.”

- Rob Roy Kelly

Pedagogy