

Requirements for an Effective Graphic Design Program



What is Basic Design?

Basic Design is the introductory educational program for students who seek a career as a visual artist. Sometimes Basic Design is taught within the context of a single discipline, but in most instances, it is a general program preparing students to enter any one of several disciplines.

Basic Design is expected to provide a foundation that is applicable to all visual art programs. Basic Design equally prepares students who elect painting, design, sculpture, printmaking, photography, crafts or architecture as a major.

Because of general requirements for Basic Design dictated by content that is in common to all visual disciplines, imagery is more abstract than representational, and the program deals more with theory, formal values and less with practice.

What are Reasonable Objectives for a Basic Design Program?

- 1 The foremost objective is visual literacy. Visual literacy is defined as an ability to view nature, objects or any imagery as abstractions for purposes of making visual judgments. It includes

an ability to see form or illusion of form, space (both positive and negative) or illusion of space, and interaction of color.

- 2 Students should be familiar with a variety of visual elements such as line, shape, scale, texture, point, plane, and others.
- 3 Students should understand visual principles and all the various interpretations for each. Visual principles describe tension, figure ground or activation of space, spatial definitions, configurations, color interaction, rhythm, pattern or interrupted pattern or others.

Students

Students apply for the program, they are screened and only a fixed number accepted. Acceptance into the program is based on demonstration of talent and commitment. Sections are limited to no more than eighteen to twenty-four students.

Students are prone to believe that teachers should give them an education rather than having to earn it. Education is not a gift. It can be achieved only through dedication and with hard work.

A diploma and an education are not one and the same – you can have either one without having the other.

Students are expected to:

- Know the terminology associated with Basic Design.
- Show initiative in exploring concepts.
- Be self-critical and able to make visual decisions and refinements.
- Have strong eye and hand skills and able to discern minute variations.
- Have good work habits and be disciplined.
- Demonstrate dexterity in using rudimentary tools.
- Have experience with appropriate media.
- Have technical knowledge of tools, materials and processes at a fundamental level.
- Have exposure to historical precedents, works and figures in art and design.
- Have the rudiments of a value system by which to make visual decisions in evaluating work or that of others.
- Have the vocabulary and criteria with which to discuss work with teachers.

Students who do not meet performance standards or other conditions of the program are dropped without hesitation.

Faculty

The key factor to success is in the choice of faculty. It has been said that there are no bad students, only bad teachers.

Faculty themselves must be graduates from a structured program, educated in and knowledgeable of, visual principles and dedicated to teaching at the beginning level. Faculty may be drawn from any of the visual disciplines such as painting, design, sculpture or drawing.

An ability to communicate with students is more important than professional accomplishment or talent. Communication is not in reference only to verbal expression. Some teachers can communicate more with a finger than others who are exceptionally articulate. It is only important that teachers can communicate with students no matter how.

Faculty must be consistent and resolute in demands on students for all aspects of the program. If there is more than one section, it is best if the same faculty member teaches both sections. Faculty must be compatible with one another and willing to work as a team.

Program

- Content of the program is restricted to theoretical or fundamental exercises in design, color, drawing and form in conjunction with an orientation lecture course.
- All exercises are given with strict limitations in terms of format, materials and objectives. Most design exercises are done in black and white; the majority of drawing exercises are done with pencil or pen; color may be done as collage, etc.
- Extensive refinements are demanded for all studio work. Exercises are sequential and accumulative. There is correlation between different courses with common terminology.
- The unequivocal thrust of the program is instruction – not art, expression, professionalism or anything other than focus on visual principles, criteria, craft and orientation. Criteria are objective and made available to students with each assignment. Subjective concerns are never a factor in evaluation of student work.

- There is conscious and ongoing effort to develop and require eye and hand skills.
- There is discipline. No radios, headsets, visiting or other disruptive behavior during class time. Students are expected to be in class at a fixed time and excessive absences result in being expelled from the program.
- There is instruction in the use of basic tools and media. Nothing is taken for granted when dealing with first year students. This includes such mundane things as how to hold a pencil and that it must have a point.
- All work is self-paced and students move ahead only after they demonstrate understanding of an assignment. Student work is not graded or collected until the semester end. It is recommended that evaluation and grading of student work at the end of each semester is by review with all faculty members participating. Each student is given a space to display their work. After faculty examination of the work, individual students are brought in and the work is discussed with them. A grade is given at this time.
- Concurrent with studio work, a one hour orientation lecture and slide course is offered. The content is slides of work by painters, sculptors, designers, photographers or architects that provide exemplary role models or illustrate the visual principles being worked on in class. There should be opportunity for faculty presentation and student discussion.

What Happens the Next Year?

Basic Design should not begin with the first semester and end with the second semester. As students move into the discipline of choice, teachers need to be familiar with the Basic Design program, its content and objectives.

Students have to be reminded that moving into a discipline is not something entirely different, but rather, it is an extension of previous studies into more specific areas of concentration. It is essential that instructors in the major reinforce what students did in Basic Design. Students have not always assimilated what they learned from the first year, and they have to be reminded, prodded and pushed to carry over earlier experiences. Student efforts in this respect are often clumsy and obvious, but in time, lessons from Basic Design become reflexive and automatic leaving students free to concentrate on new objectives connected with the area of concentration.

Within my experience, the third semester is the most critical and difficult to teach because of the necessity for bridging the gap between general and specific or theory and practice. Making the connections is determined to a great extent by the attitudes and abilities of teachers within the discipline.

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

Why Have Basic Design Programs so Often Failed in the Past?

The primary reasons are:

- 1 Upper level teachers do not understand connections between Basic Design and their area of concentration.
- 2 Upper level teachers cannot define or agree upon what is *basic*.
- 3 Because upper level teachers do not understand connections between Basic Design and the major, they do not know how to build on the first year experience, so they tend to dismiss it as a waste of time.

A school must survive in order to educate, however, its only justification for survival lies in the quality of its education.

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Few teachers themselves have come out of strong basic programs so most do not have a model by which to judge or formulate an effective program in introductory studies. They do not know what content or structure is required or how it relates to upper level classes. Consequently, they do not grasp the concept of a general program that can accommodate a variety of disciplines.

Because of these conditions, upper level instructors within the majors tend to either be critical even hostile, contemptuous or completely ignore the introductory program.

When I enrolled at art school during the 1940s, the introductory courses were taught by a mixture of painting, sculpture, design and drawing teachers. Painters felt that monochromatic painting using black, white and shades of gray was basic.

Sculptors believed that modeling with clay and working with plaster were basic. Drawing teachers started students with charcoal, newsprint pads and figure drawing from a model. The design teachers gave disconnected exercises dealing with line, point and plane. Many of these notions still persist and some that are even more nonsensical still prevail at many institutions.

Typical Reactions by Upper Level Instructors to Structured Basic Design Programs:

- 1 Assignments are too limited, rigid and look like what was done last year.
- 2 Perspective is viewed as being *too technical*; and drawing exercises such as ellipses or that which is descriptive of structure are *too mechanical*.
- 3 Any structured Basic Design program is a rehash of Bauhaus with an inference that it is outdated and irrelevant.
- 4 The student's education does not really begin until they are enrolled in the major.
- 5 Structured Basic Design programs stifle creativity and there is insufficient opportunity for individual expression.

Observations and Comments

- 1 My experience and observations tell me that a majority of American students are responsive to the challenge of a demanding educational program if they believe it will benefit them. This is particularly true for mature and serious students. Most students who survive a strong Basic Design program do well over the balance of their education, and a high percentage of them are working professionally five and ten years after graduation. This is not the case with students from weak introductory programs.
- 2 In a few instances, Graphic Design has done a more credible job with Basic Design than any other discipline. Within the best Graphic Design programs, Basic Design is better understood, there are less students, the program is focused and basic tenets are reinforced throughout the entire educational experience.
- 3 The state of visual education in American educational institutions has regressed to levels that are both tragic and pathetic. It is highly doubtful that there are more than five to ten creditable programs in Basic Design throughout the entire country at this time. And the majority of these are internal to Graphic Design programs. The roots for the dissolution of visual education in this country are found mainly in universities.

Some of the contributing factors have been:

- Putting visual arts into the liberal arts context rather than treating it as a professional program. Administration funding programs on the basis of enrollment numbers rather than need.
- Open admissions where students enroll in classes based on their place in line at registration rather than on individual abilities.
- Accept too many students into the department in relationship to budget, faculty lines, facilities and space. Unlimited enrollment simply does not work in visual education.
- Lumping elective students with majors in studio classes. Reduction, if not actual elimination, of student performance standards. In many respects, grading has become meaningless at the worst, and inconsistent at the best as many teachers in Art give every student an A or B.

- Many universities do not allow minuses or pluses in the grading system seriously restricting the distinctions that can be conveyed to students regarding performance.
- The university policy of repeating basic courses in the Spring semester. This detracts from the education of students enrolling in beginning courses during the Fall semester as teachers must repeat rather than teach new courses during the second semester.
- The policy of repeating courses every semester encourages students to drop in and out of the program at will which interrupts the educational sequence and extends the period of time in school. Both of these factors are detrimental to the best interests of students.
- Over reliance on graduate assistants for teachers.
- On most university campuses, art history has become irrelevant to studio arts. Much less credits in art history courses should be required, and they should be part of the humanities requirements. Art and design history work best when taught in conjunction with studio courses.
- Excessive use of multipurpose classrooms without sufficient dedicated space for individual student workstations.
- Organizational structures where there is no appointed leadership for each discipline.
- Equal Opportunity Employment with institutional quotas for women and minorities that often inhibit hiring the most qualified teachers.
- Too many graduates of weak university visual art programs going on to teach at other universities compounding an already deplorable situation.

There is nothing wrong with a majority of teachers, but how they are managed is often terribly wrong, and this leads to cynicism and poor teaching.

- Art schools hiring university graduates to gain academic respectability, and in the process corrupting professional programs traditionally associated with independent schools of art.
- University regents or trustees putting substantial funds into performing arts centers and museums rather than into instruction in the arts.
- Administration putting pressures on individual teachers for professional accomplishment or research ahead of teaching and educational quality.
- Student evaluation of teachers and the merit system are also contributing factors. The problems are not with the demands, but in how administrators choose to define and use them.
- Tenure is definitely a problem for fields such as art and design. A teacher's sense of security should be grounded in abilities and self-confidence rather than an artificial security such as tenure. Programs in art and design require a flexibility that is seldom possible within a tenure system.

The problems for visual education today are so severe and institutional practices and policies so ingrained, it is doubtful that change can take place. There are few if any sources for teachers that understand visual education even if institutions wanted to reform programs, practices and policies.

- 4 In the short term, perhaps the best step toward improving visual education would be to separate service courses from programs in the majors. Use the general introductory program as a service course for the university. Allow students to enroll in the major the first year, and hope for the best. Each discipline, or division of disciplines, would be responsible for an introductory program. This would require additional faculty lines, space and budget.
- 5 A longer range solution would be to draw up a plan for a credible professional education for artists. Institutional policies as they pertain to visual education would also have to be redefined. The plan would be implemented in incremental steps, over a period of years. My experience of working with art faculty on committees leads me to believe that the plan should be formulated by a small, select group of outside consultants. It makes no sense for the people who are the problem to be the ones to recommend a solution.
- 6 Another approach would be to establish a separate, elitist professional program in addition to the existing one. The new program would incorporate the most desirable and favorable concepts leading to an effective visual education. The current program would retain its liberal arts emphasis and provide service courses for the university. Over a period of time, faculty lines and resources would gradually be transferred over to the professional programs, and eventually, it would become the program.