

A perfect design

Local graphic design programs get students involved in community outreach

By Erica Hudock
Contributing Writer

She had the passion and the talent, but choosing to study art was one of the most difficult decisions Jillian Erhardt ever had to make. She knew graphic design is a growing field, however, she struggled with the idea that she would be doomed to sit behind a computer screen, detached from her department, clients and the community.

"I was looking for another outlet for my design," Erhardt explains. "I had a problem coming to art school and feeling like I'm not benefiting the community in any way; I had second thoughts."

Into her sophomore year, Erhardt found the answer she was looking for in the Maryland Institute College of Art's latest innovation: the Center for Design Practice. This unique internship-like experience is just one of the more recent efforts taken by art schools in the Greater Baltimore region and around the country to connect students with real-world experiences for the competitive field of graphic design.

Portfolios are necessary for rising stars in the art world, but MICA's CDP founder and director, Mike Weikert, stresses that immersing oneself in the design process consequently molds the artist into a well-rounded and invested part of the project.

"When I was offered to co-chair the program, I was trying to bring the real-world perspective in the curriculum to expose students to the kinds of problems they'll be asked to solve out in the real world," Weikert says.

As a result, Weikert started the CDP in 2007, which he calls a "multi-disciplinary studio dedicated to preparing the next generation of design leaders."

"We focused on the idea of students from graphic design, environmental design and animation working together," Weikert explains. "MICA was trying to establish this kind of research at an art and design school. I proposed that we try to create scenarios where these kinds of projects are not constrained by a kind of department ... and that they are more intuition-wide."

Credit is given to the interviewed then selected students who participate each semester, but more importantly, students are taking part in the same

problem-solving process conducted between design firms and their partners that can't be found in a classroom, Weikert says.

What makes the CDP's projects so unique is its mission. Each project is pursued with the intent to reach a solution for a problem met by a community organization. Whether it is a Web site, video or interactive display, the students are charged with the collaborative research and analyzing of the problem in cooperation with the client, while committing to an effort that will result in a positive, local impact.

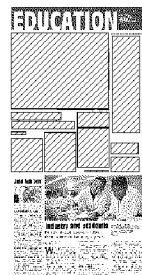
"My role is to sort of implement the process," Weikert says. "When students are working on these projects and are becoming knowledgeable about issues, they being to realize that it's much bigger than them; they have a responsibility to affect things. It's a pretty powerful thing to see."

One such project partnership is with Healthy Homes, a division of the Baltimore City Health Department that seeks to educate the community

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above: Courtney Johnson enrolled in the Community College of Baltimore County while she was working at Johns Hopkins as a programmer. The clinical skills she gained at CCBC led to a promotion.

top left: In the Center for Design Practice, MICA students (clockwise from lower left) Ben Bows, Robin Brooks, Nick Brooks, Leah Horowitz, Lauren Adams, Andy Mangold and Lauren Hastings collaborate while brainstorming for a community outreach project.





John Dean, Contributing Photographer

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THE SUN

Date: Sunday, November 22, 2009
Location: BALTIMORE, MD
Circulation (DMA): 377,561 (24)
Type (Frequency): Newspaper (S)
Page: 1S 4S
Keyword: Maryland Institute

