PURPOSE

The AIGA, NASAD, and their respective members seek to ensure the best possible future for individuals and institutions involved in graphic design. This document addresses two critical issues: relationships among various degree programs and professional preparation; and truth in advertising.

Many institutions offer graphic design courses and curricula; however, content, time on specific tasks, expectations, and required proficiencies for graduation reflect various purposes. The label graphic design carries many meanings. This diversity is healthy as long as each institution presents itself and its graphic design programs accurately, and as long as students, the public, and the profession can rely on relationships among published purposes and curricula on the one hand, and actual preparation for performance in the field on the other.

The text that follows is intended to help all concerned – from prospective students to faculties to internal and external evaluators to institutional administrators to employers – consider the extent to which specific graphic design programs can accomplish their published goals and the clarity and accuracy of projections about career preparation. Within higher education, this document is especially useful for:

Planning for the improvement of current programs;
Examining the viability of current programs;
Assessing the need for, the projected viability of, and the ability to support new programs;
Planning new programs.

AIGA/**NASAD briefing paper**

BASICS

Graphic design is the profession that plans and executes the design of visual communication according to the needs of audiences and in the context for which communication is intended.

An Important Distinction

The broad field of design contains a number of major specializations. Studies in design are often required for degrees in other fields. Normally, basic design studies are essential for fine artists and architects, as well as for designers in all areas. Because of all of these uses of the term *design*, it is critically important to maintain distinctions between them and the term *graphic design.*

Terminology

Several titles in common use designate the graphic design profession: *graphic design, visual design, visual communications, communication design, communication arts, commercial art.* The term *illustration* does not refer to the same profession. The term *graphic arts* may refer to technical support areas such as printing or electronic pre-press and not to the profession of graphic design based on problem-solving competence as detailed in the NASAD standards for majors in graphic design.

Common Body of Knowledge and Skills

Graphic designers ready to work as professionals have mastered a broad range of conceptual, formal, and technological skills. Whatever educational or career paths they have taken, certain fundamental competencies have been acquired. For a full explanation of this common body of knowledge and skills, see Appendix B.

Degree Programs and Professional Preparation

Degree programs exhibit many variables – lengths, titles, purposes, expected results. However, the presence of graphic design content in courses or curricula, or even its designation as an area of emphasis or concentration, does not automatically indicate that the program is structured for students to acquire the common body of knowledge and skills necessary for professional practice. While no single curriculum structure is preferred, there is a minimum threshold of competency for professional practice in graphic design that generally can be acquired only within a four-year undergraduate professional degree program that provides a comprehensive education in the discipline. Programs that address only parts of the whole may provide opportunities for more breadth in design, art, or other subjects, expecting that the remaining portions of knowledge and skills for graphic design will be developed through subsequent study if the student wishes to pursue a career in the discipline. Given the tremendous diversity among programs with graphic design content, any claim that all curricula offering some graphic design study produce the same thing – a student fully qualified for entry into the profession – is misleading. Claiming more than can be delivered by the structure, content, or resources of the curriculum being offered also misleads students and can create future difficulties for students and employers.

UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

Four-Year Professional Degree Programs in Graphic Design

Purpose. Within the framework of a four-year undergraduate program, the professional degree with a major in graphic design that meets NASAD standards (see Appendix B) is intended to prepare students specifically in the common body of knowledge and skills required for entry as a career graphic designer. In this degree plan, usually titled *Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design* or *Bachelor of Graphic Design*, the overwhelming majority of credits (at least 65%) are dedicated to design or design-related course work with at least 25% in graphic design. The remainder are taken in the liberal arts. The program is specialized rather than broad-based.

Professional preparation. The AIGA and NASAD recognize degree programs meeting NASAD standards for professional undergraduate majors in graphic design as adequate preparation for career entry. Although no curriculum can guarantee a specific career, successful graduates of accreditable four-year professional programs should be qualified for most entry-level positions in graphic design, although their specific course work may make them more suitable for subspecialties (examples: electronic multimedia work vs. print, exhibition, packaging, environmental, or advertising design). Likewise, these students should possess the education necessary to move toward management and/or leadership positions within the field as it is currently practiced and also be ready for advanced graduate study in the field of graphic design.

Graphic Design in Four-Year Professional Studio Degrees with Majors Other Than Graphic Design

Purpose. The professional undergraduate degree in studio focuses on the creation and study of art and/or design. Normally, at least 65% of the course work is devoted to this overall purpose; the remainder, to studies in the liberal arts. *Bachelor of Fine Arts* is the usual title. Within this large framework, there are many possible goals and objectives for graphic design, and thus many ways graphic design content may be included. Some of the most common are: 1) a small amount of required or elective course work as part of either a general studio program or a major in another art or design field; 2) a set of courses that constitute an area of emphasis, specialization, or concentration within a larger major such as general design, studio, or art; and 3) course work or projects assigned under the auspices of an individual studies program.

Professional preparation. Depending on their goals and objectives, content, and the range and depth of graphic design studies, these programs provide students with a little, some, or a significant amount of pre-professional preparation in graphic design. However, the AIGA and NASAD do not recognize professional undergraduate degree programs with less than a major in graphic design as providing full preparation for entry and later upward mobility within the graphic design profession. Students who enroll in these programs should view them as a way of: 1) gaining a broad-based professional degree in art or design, or a specific professional degree in a field other than graphic design; 2) acquiring aspects of the common body of knowledge and skills for professional practice in graphic design; and 3) developing a sense of where graphic design fits into future education and career plans.

Graphic Design in Four-Year Liberal Arts Programs

Purpose. Liberal arts programs are the most common undergraduate degree in the United States. They place a greater emphasis on general academic studies, a lesser emphasis on studio design and visual arts studies than professional degree programs. Normally, 30-45% of the total credits are in the major, with the remainder being course work across a range of fields. *Bachelor of Arts* or *Bachelor of Science* are the usual titles.

In liberal arts programs, graphic design courses can never be more than a small part of the total credits required for graduation. Studio credits in general, in art or design, are fewer than in four-year professional degree programs. Promotional and curriculum materials for these programs, however, too frequently describe a graphic design *focus, specialization, concentration,* or *major.* Although consistent with the way these terms are used to describe other sets of course requirements within an institution, such words can mislead students to believe graduation will qualify them for employment in design at any level. Unfortunately, these are also confusing terms for employers who interpret them initially as evidence of accelerated or major study, when normally, they only represent a small cluster of design courses within a group of art/design and art/design history offerings.

Professional preparation. *The AIGA and NASAD do not recognize a four-year liberal arts degree in art or design as adequate preparation for entry as a graphic design professional.* Such programs have important functions and are the appropriate degree for many students, but they are not structured to provide the requisite body of knowledge and skills in graphic design. Graduates who are successful in gaining employment usually experience limits on their movement within practice or require extensive apprenticeship training, which is becoming increasingly rare in a climate of high-pressure performance. They frequently discover that to be competitive they must pursue a second bachelor's degree in a professional design program (*Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design, Bachelor of Graphic Design, etc.*) or a professionally oriented master's degree in a graphic design program that accepts students with a liberal arts background.

Students who enroll in liberal arts programs should view them as a way of: 1) gaining the valuable knowledge and skills inherent in a broad liberal education; 2) acquiring a general foundation for later design study; and 3) determining their level of interest in design or graphic design.

Two-Year Programs in Graphic Design

Purpose. Some institutions, including community colleges and technical schools, offer courses and curricula described as *graphic design, commercial art, graphic arts,* and *visual communications* in a two-year format. *Associate of Arts, Associate of Science,* and *Associate of Fine Arts* are typical titles. Effective programs prepare students for: 1) technical support positions in the field of graphic design and visual communications, and/or 2) transfer to a design program in a four-year institution.

Technical support. No other aspect of design practice has experienced the level of growth and change found in technical support. The configuring and networking of technology for design studios, preparing electronic files for output in comprehensives, electronic pre-press, digital manipulation of photography, converting of files from one software program to another and from print-based to electronic formats, scripting and programming for web design, and designing of computer templates for a range of users are just some of the technical functions that did not exist 15 years ago. Mastering these skills, as well as the changes in software, can easily fill a two-year curriculum, especially if students must also understand the design context in which such work must be performed. Design studios, advertising agencies, and corporations search for individuals who have these skills and consistently report shortfalls in qualified applicants. In metropolitan design centers, new companies have formed to provide precisely these services to groups of clients on a contractual basis.

Individuals prepared in two-year programs to provide technical support services are not designers responsible for the invention of appropriate visual form and/or for strategic communications problem-solving. Students who enter two-year programs for the purpose of gaining technical competencies that support the design professions should not expect that their education also prepares them for design and design management level positions.

It is the position of the AIGA and NASAD that two years of study are insufficient to prepare an individual for entry into the field as a graphic designer or strategist, and that there is a limit to what students graduating from two-year programs can expect in employment opportunities in design. To advance in the field, broader competence in the common body of knowledge and skills is required.

Transfer programs. Two-year programs that advertise the potential for student transfer to four-year programs in other institutions are responsible for curriculum coordination, articulation agreements, and graduation expectations that substantiate their claims. It is common for two-year graphic design programs to enroll, in the same courses, students who want only an associate's level education and potential transfers to four-year institutions. The all-too-frequent result is a compressed, generalized set of design courses that may not be accepted as transfer credit by four-year programs in which discrete topics such as typography are examined in greater depth across a longer, sequenced course of study. Transfer students experience surprise and frustration when four-year institutions accept only a few credits. Two-year programs should clearly differentiate courses designed for a two-year technical education from those designed for students who will transfer to a four-year degree program.

MASTER'S DEGREES IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

At present, the master's degree is not required for professional practice in graphic design and there is no professional licensing or certification of graphic designers. The initial *Master of Arts* or *Master of Science* (30 semester hours) is offered by a number of institutions. The terminal *Master of Fine Arts* (60 semester hours) or its equivalent, however, is more typical. It is required by most colleges and universities when hiring graphic design faculty. Consequently, there are no practice-driven criteria that shape master's study in the same way that they indicate certain course work at the undergraduate level. Thus, several profiles of master's study in graphic design have developed. While individual programs will be quite tailored in their approach, several general descriptions might include the following:

General practice orientation. Under one profile, students with educational experiences other than the four-year professional undergraduate degree with a major in graphic design can prepare for graphic design practice or undergraduate teaching careers. In MFA programs, the goal is to ensure completion of the common body of knowledge and skills and to refine and expand visual skills and address issues of complex design problem-solving. Instruction will resemble design office practice and student work will be largely in applied problems. Curricula generally follow the model of fine arts, with high concentrations in studio instruction and a culminating project or exhibition.

Specialized practice orientation. Under another program profile, students focus on an area of practice or a particular philosophical approach to graphic design. These programs, by definition, narrow the range of issues addressed. They rely heavily on in-depth investigations that push the boundaries of a practice specialization or on personally defined problems. They may lead to a way of looking at design that is in juxtaposition to the context of professional practice. Again, the conclusion of studies generally takes the form of a project or exhibition. Students in these programs often hold professional undergraduate degrees in graphic design and many have practice experience.

Research orientation. A third master's profile responds to the growing field of design research and the few doctoral degrees in the discipline. Students enter these programs to develop design research skills and to speculate on emerging issues and areas of practice. They are less concerned about (re)entering the field as it is currently practiced and more interested in developing the body of knowledge about design and the emerging research culture. While there are traditional practice-oriented positions for graduates of such programs in the field, many will elect to continue their research activity. Course work may include: 1) study of research in non-design disciplines that hold significance to the understanding of design (example: perspectives from anthropology, cognitive science, linguistics, cultural theory, computer science, etc.), and 2) studios that address issues beyond those of the typical design office. The criteria for evaluation may differ significantly from those of the other graphic design master's degree profiles, favoring problem identification and strategy more than the invention of visual form. Graduation requirements in these programs may range from a written thesis, to a final visual project, to a research project situated within a practice-oriented context.

CONCLUSION

The AIGA and NASAD support the creative advance of graphic design in higher education. The degree structures outlined here provide a basic framework for imaginative applications and unique approaches in each institution. The common body of knowledge and skills for professional preparation in graphic design provides a gauge for institutions to measure the extent to which their goals and objectives are consistent with full preparation. There are many good decisions to be made, ranging from offering introductory work to supporting a fully integrated professional graphic design curriculum. Whatever the decision is, however, fair dealing requires being clear about what each program does and does not do. Both organizations encourage institutions to review their program objectives and publications to assure consistency and to ensure that the path and the distance possible to travel offered by the institution are accurately and forthrightly stated. This objective can also be supported by careful counseling and mentoring. Such clarity helps individuals and institutions and the profession. It promotes the welfare of students. It fosters the shared respect that supports advancement and productivity on every level.

Standards
NASAD standards concerning graphic design are developed in consultation with the AIGA and approved by the accredited institutional members of NASAD. The standards address all types of programs discussed in Part II above. NASAD standards also require accuracy and clarity in goals and objectives and distinctions among types of programs in published materials. The NASAD standards mandate an effective relationship among goals, curricula, resources, and projected competencies of graduates.

Accreditation Reviews
Each institution prepares specific documentation for each curricular program, clearly outlining purposes and requirements. This documentation, along with a review of student work, is the fundamental basis for determining accreditation status. The review also determines the extent to which curricula and resources are consistent with published goals, and whether all applicable NASAD standards are met for the particular type of program.

Directory Listing
NASAD publishes an annual directory. Undergraduate graphic design programs are presented as majors by meeting NASAD standards for professional degree programs only if they have demonstrated that students are expected to gain the common body of knowledge and skills before graduation, that approximately 65% of the total program is devoted to studies in design, design history, art, and related areas, and that at least 25% of the total program is devoted specifically to studies in graphic design.

These programs are listed with graphic design standing alone either following or in the degree title, for example:

Bachelor of Fine Arts – 4 years: Graphic Design
Bachelor of Graphic Design – 4 years

Liberal arts or professional degree programs that include graphic design as an area of emphasis rather than a major are listed with Graphic Design in parentheses, for example:

Bachelor of Fine Arts – 4 years: Design (Graphic Design)
Bachelor of Fine Arts – 4 years: Studio Arts (Graphic Design)
Bachelor of Arts – 4 years: Visual Art (Graphic Design)

Programs with a small number of required or elective courses in graphic design carry no graphic design listing in the NASAD directory.

The same principles are applied at the associate degree level for both terminal and transfer programs. At the graduate level, specific protocols concerning the weight of requirements in graphic design determine whether a program is listed as a major, an area of emphasis, or not at all.

As a part of each accreditation review, each institution is required to demonstrate that catalogue and other promotional materials are accurate in presenting the types of degrees being offered.

**NASAD STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL
UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE PROGRAMS WITH
A MAJOR IN GRAPHIC DESIGN**

The following standards statement is preceded in the *NASAD Handbook* by standards for operational areas and resources, and general standards for all undergraduate and professional degrees in art and design. These additional standards must be considered if a complete picture of the standards used by NASAD evaluators is to be obtained. These standards describe the common body of knowledge and skills.

VIII.　　Standards and Guidelines for Specific
　　　　　Professional Degree Programs

J.　　Graphic Design

Graphic design is the profession that plans and executes the design of visual communication according to the needs of audiences and contexts for which communication is intended. Graphic designers apply what they have learned about physical, cognitive, social, and cultural human factors to communication planning and the creation of appropriate form that interprets, informs, instructs, or persuades. Graphic designers use various technologies as means for creating visual form and as an environment through which communication takes place.

Graphic designers plan, analyze, create, and evaluate visual solutions to communication problems. Their work ranges from the development of strategies to solve large-scale communication problems, to the design of effective communication products, such as publications, computer programs, packaging, exhibitions, and signage.

Titles normally used to identify the four-year professional programs with a major qualifying students for entry to the field are *Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Advertising Design, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Communication Design,* or *Bachelor of Graphic Design.* Only schools with sufficient qualified design faculty, technological resources, and a comprehensive curriculum of study in graphic design have the prerequisites to offer these degrees or others with different titles having career entry objectives.

1.　　Curricular Structure

Curricular structure, content, and time requirements shall enable students to develop the range of knowledge, skills, and competencies expected of those holding a professional baccalaureate degree in graphic design. Curricula to accomplish this purpose normally adhere to the following guidelines: studies in graphic design comprise 25-35% of the total program; supportive courses in art and design, 20-30%; studies in art and design history, 10-15%; and general studies and electives, 25-35%. Studies in the major area, supportive courses in art and design, and studies in visual arts and design history normally total at least 65% of the curriculum.

2.　　Recommendations for General Studies (in addition to those stated for all undergraduate degree programs)

Curriculum requirements and strong advising should direct students to general studies that support their study in design. Appropriate areas of study for all graphic design majors include communication theory, writing, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and business, as well as the humanities. Professional degree programs with a specific focus (example: advertising, design planning/management, interactive media) should require or strongly recommend study in relevant areas such as marketing, economics, organizational psychology, human factors, systems theory, or computer science. Course work in the major should make use of concepts and skills acquired through study in areas other than design. Design faculty, technological resources, and a comprehensive curriculum of study in graphic design have the prerequisites to offer these degrees or others with different titles having career entry objectives.

3.　　Essential Competencies (in addition to those stated for all professional degree programs)

a.　　The ability to solve communication problems, including the skills of problem identification, research and information gathering, analysis, generation of alternative solutions, prototyping and user testing, and evaluation of outcomes.
b.　　The ability to describe and respond to the audiences and contexts which communication solutions must address, including recognition of the physical, cognitive, cultural, and social human factors that shape design decisions.
c.　　The ability to create and develop visual form in response to communication problems, including an understanding of principles of visual organization/composition, information hierarchy, symbolic representation, typography, aesthetics, and the construction of meaningful images.
d.　　An understanding of tools and technology, including their roles in the creation, reproduction, and distribution of visual messages. Relevant tools and technologies include, but are not limited to, drawing, offset printing, photography, and time-based and interactive media (film, video, computer multimedia).
e.　　An understanding of basic business practices, including the ability to organize design projects and to work productively as a member of teams.

4.　　Relevant Competencies for Specialized Programs (in addition to those stated above for all graphic design programs, and to those stated for all professional degree programs)

a.　　For graphic design programs with special emphasis in advertising, design experiences should include the application of communication theory, planning of campaigns, audience/user evaluation, market testing, branding, art direction, and copyrighting, as well as the formal and technical aspects of design and production.

b.　　For graphic design programs with a special emphasis in design planning and strategy, design experiences should include working in interdisciplinary teams, systems-level analysis and problem solving, writing for business, and the application of management, communication, and information theories.
c.　　For graphic design programs with a special emphasis in time-based or interactive media, design experiences should include storyboarding, computer scripting, sound-editing, and issues related to interface design, as well as the formal and technical aspects of design and production for digital media.

5.　　Essential Opportunities and Experiences

a.　　Easy access to studios and libraries with appropriate graphic design resources and reference material in other relevant disciplines, such as the social sciences and the humanities.
b.　　Easy access to appropriately equipped labs and technology necessary for the execution of design solutions.
c.　　Ongoing access to instruction and critique under faculty with educational and professional backgrounds in graphic design. Sufficient numbers of qualified faculty to provide the diversity of expertise required for a comprehensive education in graphic design.
d.　　Field experiences and internships are strongly recommended.