National Association of Schools of Art and Design

An Advisory for Art and Design Faculty and Administrators:
NASAD Standards — Undergraduate Programs in Graphic Design

> The NASAD standards for graphic design and all other programs in the visual arts and design are found in the NASAD *Handbook*. This statement is advisory only, intended to assist institutional personnel applying various NASAD standards to programs that include a focus in graphic design.

Introduction

Many institutions offer students opportunities to undertake studies in the field of graphic design. These opportunities range from introductory courses to full-fledged degree programs. This advisory is intended to clarify many of the issues that arise in NASAD reviews of programs that include or are focused on graphic design. The advisory is intended to help each institution develop its approach to the field of graphic design so that all aspects of the program(s) it offers are consistent with purposes and goals for the study of graphic design it has established.

A Critical Distinction

The term *graphic design* designates both a profession and the content of a course or courses or curricula that address various aspects of that profession. Taking one or a few courses labeled graphic design is usually not equivalent to preparing for entry into the profession. Such preparation requires an intensive integrated program of studies as outlined in the NASAD standards for the professional undergraduate degree in graphic design.

Basic Purpose and Terminology

The graphic design profession plans and executes the design of visual communication according to the needs of audiences and in the context for which communication is intended. It is the presence of this goal that identifies the field and studies that support it, irrespective of titles used. In addition to *graphic design,* some of these titles are: *visual design, visual communications, communication design, communication arts,* and *commercial art.*

Content and Competencies

The content and competencies required to develop an individual for career entry as a professional graphic designer at the end of undergraduate study are presented in the NASAD standards for professional undergraduate programs in graphic design. This is found under Section IX.J. of the NASAD Standards for Degree-Granting Institutions. This statement defines the common body of knowledge and skills necessary for the professional practice of graphic design. These are threshold standards; that is, they describe fundamental or basic requirements. Individual designers develop beyond this base as they continue to work and study.

Obtaining this common body of knowledge and skills in an undergraduate program requires a significant focus on the study of graphic design and studies in other fields necessary to develop the common body of knowledge and skills.

Degree and Program Types and Characteristics

There are two basic types of undergraduate degrees.

The **liberal arts** degree focuses on a program of general studies covering a range of arts, humanities, science, and social science disciplines. Depending on the institution, general studies may occupy anywhere from 55 to 75% of the total program. The remainder is devoted to a major field.

The **professional** undergraduate degree normally reverses this approach. In the various fields of art and design, the major area occupies approximately two-thirds of the total curriculum, with the remainder being devoted to general studies and electives.

Within these two degree types, there are many ways to approach any subject; in this case, graphic design. An area of study may be addressed in a course, in an area of emphasis, a minor, a concentration, or a major. The terms *emphases, minors,* and *concentrations* do not have common usage. In general, they designate a program of courses selected to build competence to a certain level, but less than the level required for a major.

The two degree structures and the various program types provide numerous ways to approach course and curricular offerings in graphic design.

Goals, Objectives, and Published Materials

It is the responsibility of each institution to determine its goals and objectives for graphic design. The spectrum ranges from offering one or two courses to offering a full-fledged professional degree with a major in graphic design. However, given the tremendous range of choices in degree and program types, any claim that any curriculum or course offering some graphic design study produces the same thing—a student fully qualified for entry into the profession—is misleading. Published materials must demonstrate a consistency between the level of achievement of the common body of knowledge and skills for career entry being advertised by the institution and the structure, content, resources, and requirements of the curriculum being offered. The only undergraduate program structured to address fully the common body of knowledge and skills is the professional undergraduate degree with a major in graphic design. Titles normally used to identify 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. The rubric Bachelor of Science is used by some institutions to designate professional degree programs in design. However, this rubric is often used to designate liberal arts degrees. In these cases, degree content and requirements for graduation make the distinction between professional and liberal arts.

Students may gain employment in some aspect of the graphic design field without completing requirements for the professional undergraduate degree in graphic design; however, such graduates are not prepared with the full range of competencies that a professional graphic designer must acquire. Normally, leadership in the profession is provided by those possessing more than immediately marketable skills.

These statements do not indicate that individuals pursuing studies in graphic design in other types of undergraduate programs cannot eventually succeed in the graphic design profession. It simply means

that in order to do so, they must complete their acquisition of the common body of knowledge and skills through studies and experiences beyond their baccalaureate programs.

When presenting graphic design programs to the NASAD Commission on Accreditation, institutions must document a logical relationship among goals, objectives, courses, curricula, and published materials about program purposes and results.

Faculty

As is the case with all art and design subjects, faculty teaching graphic design must have in-depth expertise in the content being taught. Technological virtuosity, while important, is not a substitute for in-depth professional knowledge and understanding.

In-depth expertise is normally demonstrated by attributes such as holding a graduate degree in graphic design and documenting professional experience and achievements as a graphic designer.

There must be a sufficient number of full- and part-time faculty to teach the number of students enrolled and to address the entire range of content being offered. For example, a professional undergraduate degree program with a major in graphic design (BFA or BGD) would require full teaching support for typography, computer-assisted layout, communication and design theory, design history, design methods, multimedia and motion graphics, web site design, production, and design management, in addition to fundamentals such as drawing (and graphic translations), basic design, and color theory.

Faculty resources must be sufficient to ensure program continuity and to undertake the provision of final projects and theses, advising and counseling, and overall academic management of the graphic design program.

Technology Support

Graphic design has become a technology-based profession. Any institution engaged with course work or curricula in graphic design assumes a responsibility for maintaining adequate and current technological hardware and software. This technological commitment must be commensurate with the level of program goals and objectives and with enrollment levels. While it is understood that technology is a means for achieving human-centered communication goals, attention must be paid to technological resources. This includes, but is not limited to, an evolving sense of the technological capabilities expected of students in graphic design courses and upon the completion of any graphic design curriculum. The institution must ensure the availability of and access to the technological resources necessary to achieving those competencies. The institutional commitment normally includes the development of an effective technology plan that addresses the evolution of technological means effectively, including the purchase and maintenance of equipment and technical support. If the institution offers the professional undergraduate major in graphic design, students will normally need access to a computer for several hours a day to complete assigned work. Technological resources must be sufficient to address and planned to support the content, size, and scope of graphic design programs.

Resources

Graphic design programs must be supported by library and other visual resources. Course work associated with graphic design competencies that are drawn from other visual disciplines, the arts, humanities, the sciences, and the social sciences must be available. Students with concentrations

or majors in graphic design should be able to experience "real world" practice in their field as part of the program. Such opportunities include field experiences and internships.

Starting New Courses or Curricula in Graphic Design

The considerations listed above are particularly important when institutions are contemplating new courses or curricular offerings in graphic design. For a new program to receive Plan Approval by the NASAD Commission on Accreditation, it must show a consistent relationship among goals, objectives, curricula, published materials, technological support, and resources in general. For example, a program proposal to offer a professional undergraduate degree with a major in graphic design with only one or two faculty members and five workstations for a projected enrollment of fifty students will be challenged by the Commission as it applies the curricular and operational standards of the Association. As is the case with all programs, success for graphic design courses and curricula are developed through careful strategic planning that takes into account all of the factors that are needed to be successful, not only to start the program, but to continue and nurture it in perpetuity.

Such analysis and planning includes but is not limited to:

(a) The availability of potential students.

(b) The employment opportunities for students.

(c) The availability of qualified full- and part-time faculty in sufficient numbers and sufficient breadth of expertise.

(d) Other programs with which the new program will compete.

(e) The role graphic design is to play in the overall complement of disciplines in the department or college, and the impact of the new program on overall enrollment patterns and resource allocations and distributions.

(f) The projected enrollment limits for the program and mechanisms for enrollment management.

(g) The availability of space and equipment commensurate with the size and scope of the course or program.

(h) The presence and projectable security of revenue streams needed to support all aspects of the program.

Presenting Graphic Design Curricular Programs to the NASAD Commission on Accreditation

Each institution offering a graphic design area of emphasis, minor, concentration, or major should provide the Commission with clear documentation of a workable and projectable relationship between programs goals and objectives and all other elements discussed in the standards found in the NASAD *Handbook* and annotated in this Advisory. The Commission respects many approaches for placing graphic design content in art and design curricula. It is incumbent upon each institution, however, to make choices about what it will do in the field of graphic design based, in large part, on what it is able to do. It is also incumbent upon each institution to present prospective students, prospective employers, and the public a clear and honest presentation of what the program can be expected to accomplish.

Additional Resources

The NASAD *Handbook* contains standards applicable to all programs in art and design with regard to operational issues such as mission, goals, and objectives; size and scope; finances; and so forth. As already noted, the *Handbook* also contains specific standards regarding curricula for all undergraduate degrees in art and design, all liberal arts degrees, all professional degrees, and all professional undergraduate degrees with a major in graphic design (see NASAD *Handbook*, Standards for Degree-Granting Institutions).

The American Institute of Graphic Arts and NASAD collaborated on four briefing papers that provide additional analysis and information concerning a number of the points raised above. The titles are (1) *Degree Programs and Graphic Design: Purposes Structures, and Results;* (2) *Selecting and Supporting Graphic Design Faculty;* (3) *Technology Thresholds in Graphic Design Programs,* and (4) *General Education and Professional Undergraduate Programs in Graphic Design.*

Approaching NASAD Standards

As is the case with all NASAD standards, the purpose is to emphasize the development of student capabilities, not set bureaucratic requirements for the operation of art and design units. Since accreditation is based in large part on the mission, goals, and objectives developed by each institution, the best place to start is by determining the present goals and objectives for student competence in graphic design—in other words, starting with the *what* and the *why* before proceeding to the *how.* When *what* and *why* questions are answered thoroughly, the *how* questions answer themselves. Then it is easier to make adjustments so that *what, why,* and *how* are in a workable relationship.

> **Art and design units with further concerns about the intent of graphic design standards are invited to contact the NASAD National Office staff at:**
>
> **Telephone: (703) 437-0700**
> **Facsimile: (703) 437-6312**
> **E-mail: info@arts-accredit.org**