

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



Shannon Chance, AIA, Editor

PROCEEDINGS of the
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What I Learned from My Assistantship: The Role of Research Assistantships in Beginning Design Education

“This semester was my first in the School of Architecture. As a graduate student, I was given an assistantship working with an assistant professor and a 3rd year graduate student in his final year of study. My assistantship was a research-based project focusing on campus planning and gateway development. I knew that the project would be a challenge, since I hadn’t had a lot of experience in architecture or collecting research. At the end of the semester I was surprised at how many skills I had obtained” says one beginning architecture/landscape architecture graduate student.

Schools of architecture around the country use assistantships to fill a variety of needs in their programs. Too often this includes shelving books, opening and closing the model shop, running copies, and other such busy work. Learning design and research within these types of assignments is implicit, secondary, and usually disconnected from the skills, knowledge, and techniques they will need to become the successful architects the profession requires. Graduate faculty at one Historically Black University’s School of Architecture have begun a concerted effort to structure assistantships based explicitly on a foundation of promoting types of learning applicable to development of exceptional students. In this way, assistantships become a form of directed independent study rather than directed labor.

“My initial expectations were that we would be finding information for the professor to analyze and manipulate but to my surprise, instead of just being worker bees, the professor wanted our input and analysis of the materials that we came across. This meant that we would get an opportunity to get our hands on the information and mold the ideas that would be presented to the university and community. This approach was a great stimulus in that it expressed the confidence that the faculty had in our ability as students. Furthermore, having our names associated with the work instilled a certain sense of pride in what it was we would be doing,” explains one student.

This student/faculty discussion session for the *Not White: Diversity in Beginning Design Education Conference* will address the role of research assistantships in beginning design education. The co-presenters, including two graduate students, will reflect on what they’ve learned through their research assistantships during Fall Semester 2003. To provide background context, their faculty advisor will discuss the rationale of using assistantships to supplement the educational experience, particularly in terms of helping the beginning design student learn new skills, knowledge, and research methods not otherwise taught in the beginning student’s first year of study. The session will conclude with a discussion of how other students and professors can make the most of an assistantship’s learning potential.

abstract

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Editor’s Note: This paper was submitted and accepted as a student paper, but subsequently authored by Matt Powers.

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Introduction

“This semester was my first in the School of Architecture. As a graduate student, I was given an opportunity to have an assistantship working in the School of Architecture. The assistantship that I was given was a research-based project. I knew that the project would be a challenge, since I hadn’t had a lot of experience with collecting research or doing design. At the end of the semester I was surprised at how many skills I had obtained” says one graduate student.

The School of Architecture at Florida A&M University (FAMU) is improving graduate education by doing something new, at least, something new to most administrators, faculty, and students at the school. Instead of using graduate students primarily as helpers and laborers, the graduate program leaders in architecture and landscape architecture have been encouraging faculty to use assistantships as an opportunity to mentor and teach graduate students the skills, concepts, and processes they’ll need to be successful in school and later as professionals.

Characterizing this approach as entirely new for the school is somewhat misleading because professors have previously served as mentors to their graduate assistants and many students have learned important skills through their assistantships. However, now the difference is faculty and students’ efforts are becoming more explicit, supported, and directed. Philosophically, the shift from a faculty-centered, labor-based model to a student-centered, teaching and learning based model is a profound distinction. Now, many students and faculty view the purpose of assistantships as scholarly exercise rather than physical legwork.

Paper Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to describe Florida A&M University’s School of Architecture (SOA) assistantship model for the benefit of other graduate programs that are looking to maximize learning opportunities within the existing structure of their institution. Interviews with administrators, faculty members, and graduate students will illustrate the SOA approach. The experiences of these people allow the reader to see the participants the advantages of creating student-centered assistantships.

Requesting and Assigning Student Assistants

Once funding and available graduate assistants are determined, here is how the graduate assistantships are proposed and assigned. First, administrators, faculty, and occasionally local non-profit organizations submit requests for student assistants. These requests include a description of the assistantship project and the skills a student will both need and learn from the project. Following the posting of requests, students sign up to collaborate with a faculty member or engage in a particular project. Next, the graduate program coordinators and graduate faculty review the student requests and create matches between students, teachers, and projects. The primary criteria for matching includes: 1) student year in program, 2) opportunities for enhancing student and scholarly well-roundedness, 3) balancing learning variety and continuity, 4) student interest and faculty need, 5) project time requirements, and 6) personalities. Finally, students and faculty members meet to discuss assistantship project responsibilities and schedule.

The Rationale

According to the Richard Rome, Director of the graduate program in landscape architecture, the idea to use assistantships for teaching and learning is really one that came down to us from the School of Graduate Studies and Research. Andrew Chin, Director of the graduate program in architecture added that we did not want students passively watching books in the library or tools in the woodshop – “we want these students to be active learners.”

Active Learning

The notion of using assistantships for creating active learners is an idea rooted in education literature. Most proponents of active learning emphasize the reflexivity between teaching and learning. Research stresses that active learning occurs in the presence of active teaching. Good (1983) coined the term *active teaching*, which means a positive and proactive approach to teaching in which teachers are directly involved in guiding learning. Using graduate assistantships for teaching and learning requires faculty to be more active than usual.

One faculty member remarked that having a graduate assistant is akin to teaching a directed independent study – it requires more time than a traditional graduate assistantship but has far greater rewards in terms of depth and satisfaction. In addition, Richard Rome commented “professors have a very different relationship with their teaching and research assistants than they do with their students. The assistant is just that, a participant in the whole endeavor. It is like working as a stagehand or behind-the-scenes. The assistant and the professor work together to make the event happen.”

The Assistantship Project

A significant factor in using graduate assistantships for teaching and learning is the assistantship project. The assistantship project affects the student’s motivation to learn, including the range of skills and concepts they can learn. Newell (2003) says “project-based learning emphasizes depth of understanding over content coverage and comprehension of concepts and principles rather than learning building block skills in isolation” (5). The SOA administrators attempt to support projects that are multi-dimensional and authentic, supporting the development of broad skills and concepts while emphasizing service to the school and community. In addition, preparing students to effectively write a thesis and grow as an architect or landscape architect is a special focus. As one student says, “the project creates opportunities to practice researching while exposing the student to model making techniques, the design process, and map reading to name just a few things that I’ve personally learned.”

While it is easy to conclude that the assistantship project is, as one student puts it, “simply the vehicle for learning,” there are other valuable aspects to the project. For example, one administrator remarked that the “greatest benefit is the sense of belonging that results from the experience of being an assistant and the possibilities for lifelong bonds in such relationships.” One graduate student also sees the opportunity to create bonds from the assistantship project saying that the project creates a bond between all involved by bringing the students, teachers, and local community together.

Labor and Learning

By basing the assistantship upon a project rather than a place or person, the focus from labor to learning is more apparent. All too often, graduate assistantships are time wasters for students, failing to challenge their intellect. Rome says, “using graduate students to fill staff positions undermines the very reason that students are seeking such an assistantship. Menial labor probably pays more off campus, and may provide more on-the-job training. We hope that our students actually bring something to the jobs that they are asked to do.”

One graduate student said “my initial expectations were that we would be finding information for the professor to analyze and manipulate but to my surprise, instead of just being worker bees, the professor wanted our input and analysis of the materials that we came across. This meant that we would get an opportunity to get our hands on the information and mold the ideas that would be presented to the university and community. This approach was a great stimulus in that it expressed the confidence that the faculty had in our ability as students. Furthermore, having our names associated with the work instilled a certain sense of pride in what it was we would be doing.”

The preceding student’s sentiment supports Newell’s (2003) claim that “when students have a choice of topic, have time to really investigate something of interest, have responsibility, and can see an authentic goal and rationale, intrinsic motivation and a heightened sense of alertness and interest becomes a natural by-product” (7).

Teacher’s Role

The teacher’s role in using assistantships for teaching in learning requires reanalyzing their expectations and methods. For most professors this means balancing the degree of directed and undirected support that they give their assistants. As one student says, “I believe that the teacher should help encourage the student to search for answers themselves. Not to give everything to the student.” Apart from the project requirements, many teachers are re-conceptualizing even the simplest of tasks like running copies or finding articles by asking themselves questions like: how can I get my copies while at the same time teaching a student a new concept or skill that they can really use? Or, in what ways can the student learn from finding articles and how can I encourage that kind of learning? This kind of thinking by the

teacher requires a willingness to do things differently – a trait that can become contagious – as one student says “the teacher shows the student different ways of looking at things. In this way, the teacher helps the student find their own creativity.”

In terms of mentoring, the teacher’s role is not parent but more of a discipline-based coach. As one student simply puts it, “the teacher should help put a face on the profession.” Johnson and Huwe (2003) say, “in graduate school, a mentor supports, guides, and counsels a student as he or she accomplishes the important life task of successfully navigating a rigorous graduate program and prepares to launch into a new career” (6). Perhaps the most effective way for teachers to mentor is by making themselves available and open to the enterprise itself.

Learner’s Role

Part of the student or learner’s role is to “listen and be open to ideas” says one student. While listening and openness is fundamental to learning, it is only a part of the overall purpose of the SOA approach. By using assistantship projects that build interconnected skills and conceptual understanding the school hopes to broaden the learner’s role toward “... one of carrying out self-directed learning activities rather than carrying out teacher-directed activities. Whereby students are defining their roles, tasks, and time management...learning how to communicate, show, affect, produce, and take responsibility...” (Newell 2003, 5-6). Regardless of the degree to which any one student can move toward this ambitious role, it is essential that as one student says “the student-learner have a desire to learn. Dedication is essential to achieving any goal.”

Conclusion

In the future the administrators, faculty, and students of the School of Architecture plan to continue their efforts at making assistantships an effective enterprise for teaching and learning. As Rome says, “we are working very hard to make all assistantships rewarding to the graduate student as well as the faculty member or staff person involved. In other words, the assistantship should enrich the student’s total academic experience, not only provide financial aid.” Even though “it’s premature to make any conclusions about what’s been learned from these new projects” Rome says “the program is definitely a success in sheer, economic numbers and in numbers of students served. We are now working on the quality of the experience.”

For other architecture schools that are currently utilizing a model similar to Florida A&M, we encourage you to report on your approach and progress so that we can mutually benefit from our different experiences. For schools that are yet to consider using their graduate assistantships as an explicit means for teaching and learning, we encourage you to experiment with the notion. For our part, we will continue to examine the opportunities we can provide to students that maximize their learning experiences in meaningful, lasting ways.

Finally, it is important to recognize that a faculty member and a graduate student assistant co-authored this paper. This student helped research literature, provide an account of his experience, develop an interview instrument for obtaining information from administrators, and help write and edit the paper. Thus, this paper stands as a testament to the use of student assistantships as a means to teaching and learning.

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