

not
white

diversity in beginning design education



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Non-Traditional Access to Design Education

This presentation/paper will focus on diversity in design education by providing non-traditional/career-changer students with access to innovative curricula and experiential learning processes in landscape architecture. As a response to current and perceived future challenges facing the profession, this presentation will discuss introduction of non-traditional/career-changer students to landscape architecture. This presentation/paper will candidly share lessons learned from an evolving institutional partnership that focuses on non-traditional means for obtaining a traditional education in Landscape Architecture. It is an overview of the integrated processes that form the foundation of a unique, nationally recognized educational partnership between two separate institutions (one private and one public) of higher learning. This partnership was developed to provide non-traditional/career changer students with access to the profession of landscape architecture. The discussion is based on simply discovered observations that have been confirmed through student input and includes: student profiles, their trepidations and suggestions for how integrated advising and teaching processes in seminar, design studio and practice can steward a student's journey into landscape architecture.

The profession of Landscape Architecture recently identified an impending crisis in supply and demand of qualified graduates. The burgeoning growth of environmental responsibility in urban projects and projected retirement of the baby boomer generation is causing practitioners to exert significant pressure on the academy to graduate more students - in an era of rising instructional costs and dwindling resources. To assuage these contrasting conditions, the cross-institutional partnership between The George Washington University Landscape Design Program and Virginia Tech's Washington-Alexandria Center, Master of Landscape Architecture program focuses specifically on cultivating career-changer/non-traditional students to advance urban stewardship as an interdisciplinary learning process. This joint academic program is the first ever extended campus program to be accredited by the Landscape Architecture Accrediting Board(LAAB) and the only significantly urban-based fully interdisciplinary program east of the Mississippi River. Both programs share pedagogies that use the "City as Classroom" to reveal urbanism as a living situation through which the most fertile conditions of a place may be experienced, considered and modified.

This presentation will be formatted to candidly share lessons learned from an evolving program's partnership and based on the conference's Site (Urban & Natural) category, will promote open topic related discussion.

abstract

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“I have learned to hate myself for what I am doing now . . . and I realize that I won’t become wealthy in Landscape Architecture . . . (instead) I hope to become richer in other ways.”

- *An MLA Candidate*

Introduction: The complexity of educating non-traditional/career-changer students is that they *are not* beginning students – many have significant educational and professional backgrounds. These students come to Landscape Architecture from an array of non-design related backgrounds such as; law, liberal arts, business, government service and most recently information technology. The inherent contradiction is that non-traditional/career-changer students *are* beginning *design* students. Their status is perhaps most accurately described as “academic mid-life”. Is it reasonable to argue that non-traditional/career changer students are better prepared for professional activity than their less-practiced single-career peers?

Many career changer students come to landscape architecture seeking a greater connection to the earth. They willingly cite their interest in today’s increasing societal awareness of environmental stewardship and often speak of their own intentions of civic responsibility. Others come searching for ways to respond to questions that they have carried with them throughout their lives, but have only recently surfaced. Still others seek ‘greater meaning in the lives by doing something for their fellow mankind.’ A selection of individual statements is most revealing:

“I want to be a steward of change . . .”

“I want to affect the world positively . . .”

“I’ve spent my life wanting to become a Landscape Architect . . . and now I finally have the chance to see what I am made of.”

“My best days are in gardens and I want to make places for people to feel the same as I do.”

“. . . I’m interested in the landscape as an expression of the forces that shaped it.”

The educational challenge is to capitalize on each student’s previous professional and educational experiences while constructively challenging the potential of their design abilities. In general, these are not students who will upon completion of their degrees, access the profession as entry level interns who sit in front of a computer drafting construction details. They will however, fill an array of important niches in the profession by applying their previous life skills in combination with a landscape architectural education. In our (young) programs’ experience, students have entered positions such as Interim Director of the US Department of Interior’s National Park Service Cultural Heritage Program, government and environmental consulting, non-profit organizations and teaching programs at other institutions. Conversely, although they are founded as design practices, fifty percent or more of the professional practice of landscape architecture is the “business of doing business”. Technical writing (specifications, business letters, proposals, billings and contracts) interpersonal skills in management, client relations and contacts all contribute to ensuring a firm’s success. These are often well-practiced skills of the non-traditional/career-changer student. How can faculty respond at an individual level, to more effectively support the educational journey of a student who may have significant and polished technical, verbal and organizational skills - but requires visual, representational and compositional design skills?

The profession of Landscape Architecture recently identified an impending crisis in supply and demand of qualified graduates. The growth of environmental responsibility in urban projects and projected retirement of the baby boomer generation is causing practitioners to exert significant pressure on the academy to graduate more students. The context of this dilemma is an era in higher education of rising instructional costs and dwindling resources. In anticipation of these contrasting conditions, in 1997, The George Washington University Landscape Design Program and Virginia Tech’s Master of Landscape Architecture program began a cross-institutional partnership that focuses specifically on cultivating non-traditional/career changer students. This joint academic program is the first ever extended campus program

to be accredited by the Landscape Architecture Accrediting Board(LAAB). Pedagogically, both programs share a family of students and faculty that are dedicated to revealing urbanism as a living situation through which the most fertile conditions of a place may be experienced, considered and modified. Basic student profiles of both programs reveal the following: Students have at least an undergraduate degree and many have at least one advanced degree. Most are 27-55 years old with a mean age of about 32-43 years. Approximately 65 percent are women. Minority enrollment continues to reflect the status of the profession.

Beyond Typical Advising: The most direct administrative forum for faculty to respond to non-traditional/career changer students is through advising. For career changer students, advising by faculty cannot be limited to the traditional selection of course offerings or developing an individual student's program of study. A student's ability to identify themselves in relationship to their surroundings has direct correlation to their ability to achieve academic success. Advising therefore, should provide a framework for advantaging each student's previous academic and professional experiences as they enter landscape architecture.

There are difficult moments. Students may openly question their own decision processes that have brought them to graduate school. They may agonize over having made the wrong choice in schools and/or programs, or more significantly – invested in a badly chosen career decision. In response, as a measure of their own situation against others, career changer students compare themselves with their younger peers “to see if they match up”. It is an inequitable comparison that is demoralizing at best. The grass is nearly always greener in another's pasture. Other students are often perceived as ‘having their act together’ when in reality they may be in a similar situation. Underlying these life-decisions is a nascent fear of failing, by a population unaccustomed to results other than success. Many non-traditional/career-changer students have been at the top of their game for so long that conception of their ideas being questioned, argued or constructively contested is an unfamiliar position. One of the greatest challenges that non-traditional/career changer students face is effective time management. How does one balance the rigors of design studio and other coursework, family, and work responsibilities? First and foremost, faculty must stress that design education *is not* a test of stamina. Design education *is* a resolution of one's passion, one's courage and one's commitment to a lifelong journey. Although pulling an all-nighter or more, remains a badge of honor in many design schools, for non-traditional/career changers it is often not practical or physically possible. Basic human physiology portends the obvious - a twenty two year old student sacrifices much less physically and requires less recovery time from a long charette - than a forty something student. This is a significant frustration among career changers who often (inaccurately) believe that they “can't keep up” with their younger peers. Career-changer students speak of “drowning”, “being overwhelmed” and ‘(feeling like) completing the program is insurmountable’. For faculty, the complexity in advising non-traditional students is to advocate realistic decisions about one's own physical limitations and long term health, (while not appearing to advocate a reduction in effort) and to develop opportunities that provide an educationally rigorous support infrastructure that can capitalize on a student's previous educational and professional experiences.

In our programs, the formal process of student advising begins with orientation. Orientation is the first occasion where a student's past professional ideals and newly initiated academic values become interwoven. Orientation is an annual ritual that passes the legacy of the program from one generation of students to the next. It is a critical reciprocating link in developing both incoming and existing graduate students that is built around peers sharing topical discussion and experiences. Students of the previous year's cohort are responsible for organizing orientation processes for each incoming class. In most years they have eagerly taken on the task. Travel schedules, meeting/presentation agendas, roommate assignments, meals and accompanying information books are all carefully choreographed by the veteran students. Events are typically centered around an overnight trip to Fallingwater in western Pennsylvania as context for a common design based discussion. Orientation presentations made by veteran students (in the absence of faculty) provide opportunity to candidly share insights on items such as program nuances, the university honor code, faculty quirks and oddities, reviews of course content, internship experiences, nearby eating establishments, where to obtain supplies and even where to find the least surveilled on-street parking. In turn, new students gain an understanding of the program directly from their cohorts as existing

students, while recognizing that in the following year, they will be responsible for orientation of the next class. Veteran students reflect upon their progress while incoming students are ensured that they will not inaugurate their journeys as strangers on their own campus.

Advising can also support each student's potential for individual achievement through development of coordinated coursework. For example, three credit hour seminar based methods and materials or history & theory courses can be delivered to support (at least partially) six credit hour studio endeavors. Research, projects, and term paper assignments can be developed to benefit design studio projects. Each semester, our programs engage this coordination process across the disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, planning and natural resources. At a program scale, curriculum should have enough flexibility to accommodate minor change while remaining educationally rigorous. Within reason, taking a slightly modified course load should not have a punitive effect on a student's education. Students who do not take a full load of hours during a semester, should not be unreasonably penalized by becoming out of cycle with the normal cadence of course offerings. Conversely, students should be encouraged to advance themselves at a significantly sustained pace and not become academic hobbyists.

LAND-JAM is an American Society of Landscape Architects-Student Chapter program that is unique to the Washington-Alexandria Center. It was developed by students, for students and is sustained by students as a forum for sharing topical research, projects, problems with peers. It is built around monthly brownbag lunches and end-of-semester social events. Faculty are always welcome and local practitioners periodically join the discussion as an informal means of advocating access to the profession. As a result, in partnership with the American Society of Landscape Architects – (Professional)Potomac Chapter, students were awarded a 2003-2004 National Chapter Initiatives Program grant to develop, sponsor and produce an environmental film series for Washington, DC's professional design community.

For career-changer students, advancing their education is not a singular initiative – it is a shared journey supported by spouses, family, and for those already engaging the profession – their employers – as an informal support network. For many, there are often not only financial, but significant domestic sacrifices as well. Our program actively integrates this informal support network by encouraging familiarity with the program and advocating their participation in sponsored activities such as field trips and selected outreach activities. Genuine investment in each student's support network only increases the capacity of each student to be committed to their individual advancement. Developing non-traditional/career changer student advising processes at multiple levels through faculty, individual student support and the professional community, is a long term investment in an infrastructure that strengthens both the program and profession.

Service Learning in Design Studio: Design studio is perhaps the most significant challenge for non-traditional/career changer students. Unlike the banal conventional process of completing assigned tasks and moving on to the next one, design studio is not an accustomed linear process. Design studio represents a landscape of unpredictable individual/internal and peer reviewed/external variables in which each occurs simultaneously. Each student is responsible for managing their own search in a seemingly indefinable process that is continually tempered by unanticipated discoveries that alter the pace and trajectory of their exploration. In response, some non-traditional/career changer students choose only to operate in their safety zone. They concentrate only on the things that believe that they excel in, because doing so is a self-validation process. It is easy and relatively painless to verify the things that one already knows. This is really no different than erudite pornography, because validation temporarily lets one imagine that something is real, satisfying and fulfilling when it really is not. If they are to evolve in design, non-traditional/career changer students must be directed to confront their weaknesses in design, not concentrate on their strengths.

Service learning projects are one of the most direct studio opportunities for faculty to challenge non-career/career changer students. In design programs the teaching processes in studio and seminar based courses differs significantly from a career-changer student's previous, most likely traditional didactic based undergraduate(or graduate) experience. The teaching challenge is to advantage these potentially differing student expectations with new unexplored opportunities and processes that capitalize upon, and extend the non-traditional/career changer student's familiar business world means.

Service learning projects are an effective means of engaging non-traditional/career change students because they provide a mirror for examining certain conditions of professional practice. Such projects can provide an ideal forum to associate design with previously familiar objects, events, places and processes. In service learning, there is often a real patron, a real site, and real programmatic considerations, each contiguous with the educational program brought forth by teaching faculty. Non-traditional/career change students are accustomed to participating in meetings, asking insightful questions, listening carefully, taking scrupulous notes and responding analytically to problem solving. Service learning patrons are often surprised to find a class of 40-something's coming to query them about their aspirations. Often through association with perceived contemporaries, students and patrons develop significant interpersonal relationships. These same students capitalize on their accustomed skills in making presentations, networking, and working as a part of a team.

The contradiction in implementing service learning projects comes with encouraging students to dream. They must seek work of creation and imagination instead of seeing only practical solutions that solve problems. Non-traditional/career-changer students are at times, prone to engaging a self-censuring, nay-saying process, but it is not purposeful cynicism. All but conventional alternatives are thought to be "too unrealistic", "too heavily dependent upon changes" or "too expensive". One solution to this dilemma is to develop a more kinesthetic/tactile teaching process that advocates research as a search for precedent projects or project types coupled with follow-up group discussion. This provides a reality based process that encourages applied comparison with present design problems/existing situations. The importance of this is not consensus building. Precedent search and the accompanying discourse provide a procedure for accessing possible alternatives through collective open discussion. Such situations provide opportunities to discuss material construction and the consequences and implications of tectonic choices, based on constructed works - in real time and real space. Discussion of precedent with service learning patrons also provides a non-partisan basis for developing a mutual understanding of project criteria, issues and possible solutions.

In a recent example, by working simultaneously with City staff, citizens and local business leaders, our students developed urban design proposals for Alexandria, Virginia's culturally diverse/racially-divided Little Chililagua/Arlandria neighborhood. As an outcome of the year-long effort, student recommendations and urban development strategies were subsequently incorporated into the City's community based comprehensive master plan. In another example, students have examined the processes that influence the making of places at regional, site and detailed scales. This work has also included outreach based urban design and master plan proposal development for the 3000 acre former Lorton Federal Penitentiary in Lorton, Virginia that was subsequently incorporated into Fairfax County, Virginia's comprehensive development plan. In another instance, our students gathered morphological information as the first-ever documentation of *Huntley*, Thomas P. Mason's 19th century estate in Fairfax County, Virginia. The students revealed previously unknown changes to the site and building. Subsequent student organized public exhibition and public presentations of this work were instrumental in decision to issue \$500,000 municipal bonds dedicated to the preservation of *Huntley* as a culturally significant national historic site.

In service learning projects student responsibility comes at two levels – through personal growth and through contributions of their own work to the greater collective of their peers. As a parallel to the professional world, it is implied that one must be able to present their work and roundly engage in its critical analysis with peers, contemporaries and outsiders. Students learn to recognize that although projects are often associated with a single patron or a handful of private decision makers – their execution is different from the sole authorship of a painter or sculptor. They learn that in the distance between the drawing board and implementation a host of consultants, contributing trades, public agencies and contractors intervene and that thereafter, a project's consumption and maintenance are very public.

Service learning projects may alter another, perhaps obvious tradition in design – the sketchbook. With non-traditional/career changer students there are subtleties that may either make the sketchbook a foe or a trusted companion. Non-traditional/career changer students often quickly become frustrated by using a sketchbook because they believe that their drawings are not what they think they should be – immediately beautiful. Their language/drawing skills are not yet coordinated with their desire to communicate. These students tend to confuse illustration or documentation of information with the tacit process

of representing ideas with the quality and reasoning of what they are seeking. Further they are unaware of the value of struggling with their work as a part of creation and as a means of exploring. Instead they concentrate on the product. Each may subconsciously recall their prior experiences in primary school art classes when only consummate work was rewarded and offered as example for other students to aspire to. Drawing and diagramming as a means of thinking and exploring design becomes an intimidating and frustrating endeavor and student sketchbooks are filled (or not filled) with empty pages. Often students will abandon drawing in favor of a camera, arguing that photographs-especially with digital cameras, record the work more easily and immediately (without the perceived self-embarrassment of sketching). This argument is in keeping with their concentration on product, not the process of making - or reflecting upon it.

When sketchbooks are initially introduced as places to develop an individualized language that we share as prose in speaking about design, they are more likely to become a trusted companion. As trusted companions they embody design journals of personal thoughts, reflections and images, and are apt to become more productive tools as an individual means of representing ideas. Sketchbooks are most effective when they become habits of each student's personal process as a log of ideas, notions and inspirations. They also provide a way of organizing information in one central and portable location. Although this seems obvious, this clarification is a worthy advantage in helping non-traditional/career-changer students become adapted to the new challenges of a design program.

Coda: In the context of the joint program between The George Washington University's Landscape Design Program and Virginia Tech's Master of Landscape Architecture Program, unique advising approaches and service learning projects are small components of the palimpsest that characterizes providing non-traditional/career-changer students with access to design education. These are simple student and faculty based processes that are sustained by the strength of personal grass roots initiatives between cohorts in design. They are not officially institutionalized procedures and are not found in either program prospectus. As a parallel to making a career, one project or one act does not define its success, rather its measure is based on the entire body of work that evolves incrementally and over time, is taken as a whole.

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