

Art and Design Education: Get it Right

*The value of a strong
Foundation Program in the study of Art and Design*

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Many students looking for higher education in the fields of art and design today face several challenges in choosing the school or program that best suits their goals. But there is one way to assure a truly empowering education: look for institutions that offer a strong Foundation Program.

There are three models commonly used to organize college art and design programs: expression-based, trade-based, or foundation-based. Schools that emphasize students' expressive inclinations focus on experimental and, sometimes, personal aspects of student work. In this kind of setting students are often encouraged to explore widely, even within specific courses or projects. Institutions utilizing a more trade-based approach tend to teach from the top down. That is, they train students in the professional standards of specific art or design disciplines, such as painting or fashion design. Students enrolled in programs based primarily on standards of professional practice often learn specialized technical and skills in preparation for entry into various art and design "trades." A foundation-based approach, by contrast, empowers students from the ground up by establishing a solid base of perceptual, manual, and critical skills on which further, more specialized, study can successfully build.

While "going with the flow" in an expression-based setting may be tempting, or learning "tricks of the trade" in a top-down training program may seem productive, it is most advantageous for first year college art and design students to develop a strong foundation of fundamental skills before moving toward more advanced or professionally oriented challenges. Colleges that provide Foundation Programs in art and design are set up to provide just that kind of learning groundwork.

A strong Foundation curriculum will help students develop the perceptual, thinking, and making skills that they need to later advance smoothly in more specialized visual arts degree programs. Some of the perceptual skills one might learn include recognition and understanding of the interaction of color, illusion of depth or space, proportional relationships, or other such visual phenomena. Thinking skills should be expanded in several ways in early higher education in art and design, including by developing skills of rational, intuitive, and critical analysis. Finally, making skills help students in the manipulation of various media, tools, and form construction systems so they can create well-resolved responses to later visual problems.

Foundation courses such as Drawing and Composition, Color and Design (Two-Dimensional Design), Life Drawing, or Form and Space (Three-Dimensional Design) can guide students through diverse creative challenges intended to build basic skills used by all artists and designers. Foundation instructors often link these challenges in sequential order within courses so that each new learning task advances previous lessons learned. A strong Drawing and Composition sequence, for example, might include learning “steps” such as how to use perspective to organize pictorial space or transparency to reveal the interior structures of forms in student drawings. In a Color and Design course, students might progress from the study of line as a design element to the use of negative and positive shapes, grid systems, or serial relationships as organizing systems for composition and expression. Life Drawing presents the most complex organic form, the human figure, as a basis for sustained visual analysis and indication of gesture and anatomical structure. And a Form and Space class teaches visual organization involving physical forms and the spaces they occupy or activate around them.

But why shouldn't a student jump ahead--skip the fundamentals--and move straight to more specialized training? After all, if they're hoping to someday become fashion designers or a fine artists, why not start out working on problems of fashion design or painting, as soon as they enter a college program? Some artists and designers who teach in college programs would argue that students should do just that, hoping that by exposing them as quickly as possible to the particulars of these specialized fields they can better enable students to

participate in those fields themselves. At first glance, this might seem to make sense. But it should be remembered that the things artists and designers *do* in virtually all the special fields they work in are uncannily similar. All artists and designers rely on a set of commonly recognized principles, visual phenomena, and technical means that are often best learned through focused Foundation study. There is a set of fundamentals, or underlying aspects, of art and design that remains constant regardless of professional application. And these fundamentals are best studied as a subject in themselves.

To understand why, consider this question: If two color opposites (or complementary colors) are used in an advertising design, a video installation, or a toy design, are they any less complementary? Not at all. Yellow and violet always interact in the same ways as color complements regardless of the medium, field, or the market in which they are applied. But how can students best learn color theory? Where can they best learn one-, two-, and three-point linear perspective? A good Foundation Program will focus the first year of college art or design study on the rich set of visually- and culturally-constructed systems, organizing principles, and working methods that underlie all art/design activity.

Does this mean that taking field-specific courses and projects is in some way bad for first year college art and design students? Not at all--*if* they are offered as additional elective opportunities that parallel core Foundation studies. In the best of all worlds, then, Foundation students could choose a specialized introductory course as part of a strong first-year program. Such a Foundation elective would add value to a first-year experience by providing an important bridge to the area of special interest that a student may later wish to choose as a major concentration for their undergraduate degree.

Another way a Foundation program can serve students' long-term development as artists or designers is to integrate art and design studio activity with Art History, English, and Critical Theory courses in ways that more specialized, purely professional, or expression-driven training often doesn't. That is because a Foundation Program is just that--a *program*--organized especially with first-year art and design students in mind. A programmatic approach to foundational learning allows faculty from the studio disciplines to coordinate and

share curricular material with liberal studies professors, and vice versa. Coordination of this kind between first-year studio and academic courses supports proper synthesis of the multitude of ideas, points of view, and working methodologies that students encounter throughout their college art experience.

In choosing a college for the study of art and design, then, look for schools that offer a strong Foundation program. Such institutions can be identified by searching catalogues and view-books for first year art/design curricula that include the following features:

- Required core introductory courses in Two- and Three-Dimensional Design, Drawing, and Life Drawing.
- Evidence of sequential learning in descriptions of required first year courses.
- Elective courses for first-year students in areas of specialization such as Painting, Sculpture, Digital Media, or Fashion Design.
- Supplemental course offerings in the first year that focus on general concepts and issues such as creative practice, integrated learning, or materials and methods.

Finally, the search for the right art/design college or program will not be complete until an educational setting is found that includes compelling student work. Be sure to note this aspect of each school as it is considered. A good art school or college art department will proudly display student work produced within the areas of instruction it offers.

The path through college art and design can grow from a base of core studies for life-long learning. And students can launch their future career from a strong Foundation.