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Beyond Design

It’s a cloudy Saturday morning, and you are driving through San Francisco with your windows down. Music is blasting, the air is crisp, and you take a moment to look around as you’re stuck in stop-and-go traffic getting onto the bridge when you notice billboards coloring the skies above you. As you drive away, you can’t shake the thoughts out of your mind: “shot on an iPhone X,” “EAT MORE CHIKIN,” or “Share a Coke.” Shortly after, you stop by Trader Joe’s for a snack before work and notice the handwritten signs below each item. As you check out with your plantain chips, you notice that this grocery store doesn’t feel like your average Ralph’s or Safeway. You glance at the workers in Hawaiian shirts and name-tags that read “crew member,” and observe the homemade look and feel that is promoted by the decorative signs and simplistic reusable bags. Once you arrive back home, Netflix calls for you, and you give in. Browsing through the endless options, one movie catches your eye. From billboards to food labels, your entire day has been influenced by the work of Graphic Designers.

In a world driven by commerce, there is no better time to pursue a career in Graphic Design. Many are drawn to the field of Design for its versatility in the professional realm, as well as its means to integrate art and communication to inspire and influence the surrounding environment. Generally speaking, the field of Graphic Design can be boiled down to the “using visual compositions to solve problems, and communicate ideas through typography, imagery, color, and form;” however, this can be carried out in a variety of ways including branding, marketing and advertising, digital interface, publication, packaging, motion, and illustration (Jones). At the college level, most Graphic Design majors require the same courses that teach the basics of good design techniques. This entails taking courses such as Design, Media Design, Typography, and Studio in addition to classes that develop specific skill sets (“Major: Graphic Design”). Furthermore, most all Graphic Design programs will require a capstone project and internship through the course of the degree. Although following colleges are not nationally recognized for their programs in Graphic Design, they offer attainable and quality education in the specified field of study.

Brigham Young University offers a Graphic Design bachelor of fine arts degree under their College of Fine Arts and Communications. This program is highly selective, as it only admits 25% of applicants each year. Acceptance to the Design department would mean establishing pre-major intent, in Design, and completing the pre-requisite courses, as well as submitting a portfolio for review a semester prior.

Similar to many Graphic Design programs, BYU requires preliminary courses such as Design 1 and 2, Typography 1, and Media Design 1. In Design 1 and 2, one could expect to learn anything from drawing methods, design and color theory, and visual perception to marketing, photography, and printing processes. On the other hand, Media Design 1 is focused on understanding design and communication over a variety of media types. Lastly, Typography 1 focuses on the history and principles of typographic communication (“Graphic Design”). All these courses should be taken prior to application to the Graphic Design BFA, which includes submitting a 10-12 piece portfolio of work completed during sophomore year. Once accepted, a remainder of 6 requirements are left to graduate, first of which is completing 9 additional art electives during the remaining 2 years. Examples of electives one can take include Design Thinking, Branding, 3-Dimensional Design, Typography 2, Interaction Design, Motion, and Design Lab. These courses allow students to develop their desired skill sets.

The next two requirements prepare students for life beyond college, with a two part design-based lecture series, and career and business components. Lectures are conducted by various professionals to educate students on possible careers and professional practices. In addition, the career and business courses teach students effective job search strategies, professional communication through interviewing and networking, and career development, as well as introductory Advertising, Marketing Management, and Entrepreneurship courses (“Graphic Design”). By doing this, BYU’s Graphic Design program gears students more towards its business application, in the career field. Hailie Gill, who is currently a senior in BYU's Graphic Design program, remarks that she has been able to get vast amounts of hands-on experience to prepare her for the professional world. “Last year, I interned at Studio Design,” says Gill. “I was able to do actual work and apply the things that I am learning to real world experience. I really like how BYU connects us with opportunities like this, because I feel a lot more sure about applying my education after college.” The final requirement towards graduation is the Senior Capstone Project. This semester long project allows students to showcase the skills they have learned, and get feedback from their peers and instructors (“BFA in Graphic Design (488034) MAP Sheet”). With all these requirements, BYU ensures all graduates feel prepared once they leave the program.

As far as the environment, BYU is a private religious institution under the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and is recognized for its “deep commitments to inspired religious values and rigorous intellectual learning” (“Mission and Aims of BYU”). This means it has certain expectations beyond that of most public schools, because BYU has the additional intent of strengthening character and faith. Some of these expectations include a strict dress code, being properly groomed, abstaining from alcoholic beverages, and regularly attending church meetings (“University Policies”). No wonder it’s the number 1 “Stone Cold Sober” university named by the Princeton Review (“Campus Life”).

In great contrast to this is the University of San Francisco. USF’s Design major falls under the Department of Art and Architecture in the College of Arts and Sciences (“Design”). Unlike BYU, USF doesn’t have a specific Graphic Design program, but their Design program encompasses a broad spectrum of experience that allows students the freedom to explore all areas including as Graphic, Web, Publication, Interactive and Environmental design fields (“Design”). Their aim at providing this broad learning experience is for students to gain a wide range of process-oriented skills such as conceptual and visual rhetoric, formal experimentation (“Design Major”). With this more holistic approach, USF prepares students to be versatile in an ever changing environment.

In order to develop the necessary skills, there are five course requirements at USF. The first, similar to BYU, is completing nine design-related courses across the span of four years. A few of these include Art History, Design Principles, Communication, Typography, and Digital Media Design. The previously listed courses may sound familiar because these foundational classes come standard in most Graphic Design majors. The next requirements are more career-oriented and primarily happen during the last two years. First is the seminar elective that takes place during senior year. There is a wide variety of seminar topics, but they can be viewed as extensions of topics covered in the courses mentioned above. Two of the seminars offered last year were Design and Social Change and Sustainable systems in Design (“Design Major”).

During senior year, the year is outlined with a prospective approach, similar to BYU. This means taking part in a design internship, completing a capstone project, and professional practice in design courses. Professional Practice in Design teaches skills students will need in the professional setting and educates on possible careers (“Design Major”). As far as the execution of these skills, unlike BYU, USF is in a unique position because it is set in the central urban location of San Francisco. This makes finding internships and job opportunities a breeze. Not only that, but the experiences gathered from these internships provide attainable outcomes for the future. Sydney Sylvers, a recent graduate of USF’s Design major, says an influential reason as to why she chose USF over other schools was because she thought it would be beneficial to live in a major city with high influence in art and technology. “I believe the Graphic Design program has prepared me for an entry level job in the design field of editorial print design, game design and coding,” says Sylvers, as she reflects on some of the biggest outcomes of her time at USF. Contrasting BYU, it is clear that USF provides students with a more broad range of skills upon graduation.

At USF, senior year closes with a cumulative project that “responds to specific cultural, social, and political changes in the world” (“Design Major”). The senior capstone takes a semester to complete and serves as an opportunity for students to display their work for an audience at the SOMArts Cultural Center in San Francisco. Last year’s show displayed twenty-eight different projects ranging from photography and packaging design to sculptures. One student, Margot Flynn, created a magazine comprised of interviews of women’s view in politics at the time. Her extensive research over the course of the semester was showcased in a robust collage and constructed media element. Each student has the freedom to choose what he or she wants the project to be, but every capstone must have a central idea or theme responding to something in the environment. This could be topics such as climate change and cultural diversity. “What I think is really great about our design program, is how we’re able to blend design, social justice, and current trends and issues.” says program director, Rachel Beth Egenhoefer (“Students Showcase Designs at SF Art Gallery”). Many of the students gear their projects towards issues present around them, as a result of USF’s focus on societal impact of Design. This large-scale project not only ties up everything students have learned, but it becomes part of a portfolio of work for prospective employers to view.

Beyond the classroom, there are many ways to gain experience in Design in addition to the required internships. The Graphics Center is a student run organization where students provide designs for various clubs and organizations on campus. Many Design students take advantage of this opportunity to gain work experience on a small scale as they work with real clients and are paid for their work. The American Institute for Graphic Arts at USF, or AIGA USF, is a student run club that's nationally recognized as a professional entry point. AIGA is found at many schools, but many students at USF are active members because they get to travel around the state and explore Design all around them (“Beyond the Classroom”).

Another school in California with an outstanding Graphic Design program is Cal Poly San Luis Obisbo. Cal Poly offers a Graphic Design concentration under their Art and Design Major and through the College of Liberal Arts (“Welcome from the Chair”). This is similar to USF in the sense that they don’t offer a specific Graphic Design major, but still have an exceptional Design program. The Art and Design Major includes three concentrations; including Graphic Design, Photography, and Studio Art (“Bachelor of Fine Arts”). These departments work closely together to simulate the work environment. This is one of the most distinguishing factors from other schools as Cal Poly highlights collaboration with other concentrations. However, unlike USF, which prepares students in all mediums, once a concentration is chosen, course work is geared specifically to that field of study. Application to the Art and Design Major and specified concentration is based on portfolio review during Sophomore year. This includes a one page personal statement and submission of six to eight pieces completed within the past two years (“Portfolio Requirements”).

In order to graduate from Cal Poly, there are really only three basic requirements. The first is to complete nine courses, similar to those in the previous colleges. These include Typography, Identity Design, User Interface Design, Motion Design, Illustration, Advertising, Book Arts, and Design History (“Graphic Design Concentration”). These courses are business geared, like BYU; while also being broad, like USF.

The next requirements are to complete career research and internships, and compose a senior portfolio. Throughout the course of the degree, students are closely mentored by alumni. The senior portfolio is tailored to the specific career interests and goals of the students, and is reviewed by design professionals who are also past graduates (“B.F.A. Art and Design”). Recent graduate Jo Anna Edmison built her portfolio “Todos” as a collection of pieces involving people, music, and place (“.RAW”)Unlike USF, the Senior Portfolio doesn’t have any specified structure. It just needs to showcase student ability and interest (“B.F.A. Art and Design”).

Like any school, Cal Poly has a few clubs available to students of common interests. For Graphic Design concentrations, there is AIGA and Club 34. AIGA Cal Poly, similar to AIGA USF, is a student-run professional association for design. Members attend portfolio reviews in San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and various design studio tours. Club 34 is unique to Cal Poly. They host social gatherings for the department as well as push pins, a way for students to display their work for others (“Clubs and Activities”). Claire Murray, a junior at Cal Poly says she recommends joining the design clubs because not only are they a way to gain exposure, but they are also a great way to meet new people and exchange ideas with others. At USF, there are plenty of ways to get involved and connect with like-minded individuals.

As far as careers are concerned, the field of Graphic Design is very broad. Graduates from any of the colleges listed above will be prepared to do anything from a structured position in a business or education to becoming a freelance artist. Both offer equally fulfilling work, but preference simply depends on the desired structure and restrictions. On the business side of things, there is product design, consumer services, education, entertainment, branding, and marketing which will require the use of technology in most cases. These careers are heavily regulated by the business in charge. For example, Product Design and Branding must correspond to the company as a whole to make sure designs are cohesive and effective (“Careers in Art and Design”). On the more creative end, Designers could work in traditional design studios, or as freelancers. Being a freelance artist has more uncertainty of outcome, because the Graphic Designer isn’t formally employed. However, it allows the freedom to not be restricted by brand guidelines or public standards. Depending on the position, a recent study in 2018 showed that Graphic Designers can make upwards of $50,370 per year (“Graphic Designers”).

While a degree from and of the colleges above will be valued in the professional world, Graphic Design majors at the different colleges discussed have different emphasises and structures. BYU focuses more on Graphic Design in communication and prepares their students for careers in advertising, marketing, or education. It also provides a religious-based education and holds its students to a high standard of conduct. USF focuses on societal impact of design and influencing the world for the greater good; it has a broad major that encompases all modes of design and is located in a central location of urban development and cultural change. Cal Poly has a small Art and Design major that offers a connection between 3 different concentrations, preparing students for collaboration in a professional workplace, and provides a smaller, more secluded environment. Despite their differences, the experienced gained from any of the aforementioned schools prepare graduates to enter the competitive workforce.

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