

METRO FOCUS

News, culture and life
in and around New York

NYC's Design Schools Are Booming, But Creatives Want Biz Skills

John Farley | March 19, 2012



A student works on a project at Parsons Design Studios. Parsons' dean, Joel Towers, said the school is working to connect students in its business of design program to its B.F.A. students. Photo courtesy of Parsons.

A new report reveals that New York City's design programs and schools dominate the field, but suggests that the Bloomberg administration and the schools could do more to nurture students' potential as job creators in the city.

Released on Sunday by the [Center for an Urban Future](#) — a think tank focused on New York City — “[Designing New York's Future](#)” cites that New York City graduates twice as many students in design and architecture as any other city in the country. While extolling the schools' strengths, the report also advocates for more business coursework in curricula, and suggests that beyond fashion design initiatives, the City should do more to engage product, graphic and interactive designers in collaborations, particularly in relation to the emerging technology sector.

The report is based on ten of the city's most prominent design and architecture schools, among them [Columbia GSAPP](#), the [Fashion Institute of Technology \(FIT\)](#), Parsons, [Pratt](#) and the [School of Visual Arts \(SVA\)](#). Findings include:

- Between 2001 and 2010, full-time student enrollment increased 34 percent compared to 28 percent at design schools nationally; non-design schools in New York City saw a 27 percent increase in enrollment.
- In 2010, 4,278 architecture and design students graduated in New York City; the second highest concentration of graduates in these fields were the 1,769 that graduated in Los Angeles.
- One-third of the 386 members of the Council of Fashion Designers of America attended FIT, Parsons or Pratt.
- 56 percent of designers that Center for an Urban Future surveyed said they have plans to start their own businesses.

Design: the unsung partner of technology?

Growth in the tech industry has created new opportunities for both product and web designers. Internet start-up companies like Kickstarter and Foursquare, both founded in New York City in 2008 and 2009, respectively, need designers to collaborate with programmers.

Joel Towers, the dean of Parsons and an architect, told *MetroFocus* there should be more of a relationship between tech and design and points to design as the core of the world's most valuable company. “Look at [Apple](#),” he said, “only a portion of what Apple has done has been based on engineering, the rest of their success is based on innovative design and user experience.”

David Rhodes, president of the School of Visual Arts, said that design education has “shifted more and more to doing design for the web and providing apps. That movement has already crept into the curriculum.”

Graphic courtesy of Center for an Urban Future.

Could there be a bubble?

In the past couple years, some economists and tech professionals have debated whether the tech job market is [a bubble waiting to burst](#).

Since growth in the design industry is so closely linked to the tech industry's, particularly in New York City where manufacturing is scarce, it is a cause for concern. Last April, Ohio State economics professor Richard Veder told *Forbes* that the [higher education market itself is currently experiencing a bubble](#), since costs are higher than ever while capital investments and returns on tuition have fallen off.

While David Rhodes acknowledged that there have been bubbles in the design industry and the design education industries, "The growth is much too slow right now [to fear an impending bubble burst]. I should say, this growth looks just right. The recovery in design enrollments has been gradual and steady and would seem to indicate that the underlying demand for designers is beginning to pick up."

In a wider context, Joel Towers said that the idea of designers being people who create consumer products, prone to market crashes, is nearsighted.

"If you connect consumerism to design, then I think you could see a potential bubble," said Towers. "I see a limited number of people needed to make things in the world. What we need now are people capable of addressing complex problems — and designers are good at that — beyond the traditional design sectors where they work. Take energy or healthcare. The service design component is as important in resolving and advancing in those areas as the medical, technical or policy initiatives."

Getting down to business

A 2009 survey of the [Strategic National Arts Alumni Project](#) found that 19 percent of Parsons, Pratt and SVA graduates went on to start their own businesses, compared to 14 percent of art school grads nationwide. However, when the Center for an Urban Future surveyed 322 New York City design school grads who are now professionals, only 12 percent said the schools are doing enough to give students entrepreneurial and business skills.



Center for an Urban Future asked NYC design school grads what they thought of their schools' business training curriculum. Graphic courtesy of Center for an Urban Future.

The report recommends that schools enhance their business training curriculum, develop business incubators for graduate students to start building companies, connect the designers to the city's growing industries like business consulting and healthcare and generally try to make their different programs as interdisciplinary as possible.

Both David Rhodes and Joel Towers agreed.

"We're already doing it within our graduate design programs. There's a course on business for designers that's being beefed up. We put in another course on doing a pitch. And what we have to do more of is to bring that into the undergraduate design program," said Rhodes.

Parsons offers a [B.B.A. in business of design administration and management](#), which was created a decade ago and now has 600 students, "many who go on to partner with our B.F.A. students," said Towers. "Increasingly, B.F.A. students are taking those courses in the business program. So one side looks at the business of design and the other looks at the design of business."

The report also recommended the city do more to support the design sector. It suggested the city pursue more programs like the collaborative "mini masters" in entrepreneurship for fashion designers that was created by the [New York City Economic Development Corporation](#) and FIT.

Getting a piece of the pie

The City is investing in higher education to create job growth — particularly within technology. [Cornell University](#) and [Israel Technion Institute of Technology's](#) sprawling [new engineering and applied sciences campus on Roosevelt Island](#) will aim to connect the city's tech and engineering companies, research institutions and venture capitalists to a new generation of entrepreneurs.

Not surprisingly, the report also recommends design schools get more involved with upcoming "tech campus."

"I think all of us [at Parsons] felt design was left out of the campus, it's a very engineering-centric approach to applied sciences. My feeling is human factors and design issues are as important as the engineering factors," said Towers. "I said to Seth Pinsky [president of the New York Economic Development Corporation, who helped spearhead the tech campus], you gotta get the design schools to the table."

HuffPost Arts

Posted: 02/09/2012

The Artist as Advocate

By John M. Eger

Professor of Communications and Public Policy and Director of the Creative Economy Initiative
at San Diego State University

Picasso once complained: "Everyone wants to understand painting. Why don't they try to understand the song of the birds?" He once is alleged to say he would've been a writer but he's not; he's a painter, so don't ask him to explain anything about his work.

What an artist does, what a painting or sculpture says, is not something most artists want to explain in any great detail. The work speaks for itself. What art's role is in society, however, is not easy to do either. Talking about the relationship art has to economic prowess is not easy at all. Not for the artist. Not for the business executive.

Yet, the future of business is art some say.

There is little doubt that creativity, however defined, is the most sought after skill most corporate CEOs say will be in greatest demand. Indeed, "U.S. employers rate creativity and innovation among the top five skills that will increase in importance over the next five years, and rank it among the top challenges facing CEOs," the Conference Board [reported](#) after an in-depth study. Therein lies the conflict.

It could be that all the current interest in marrying art and business will be good, indeed essential for business. But not necessarily for art or the artist. Artists will feel the pressure to explain their art to non-artists, join the business establishment, and make the marriage work for the benefit of the country's economic prowess.

Or will they?

The artist who wants to be left alone, to create their work, to use the tools of their craft to say what they feel will always be there for those who choose that M.O. as a way of life. For the other 99 percent, -- particularly the art or design graduate -- they just want a job and want to make a living. Frankly, not every graduate is destined to be a great artist or performer.

"The myth of the starving artist is just that, a myth," [according](#) to a recent report of the **Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP)**. But for many making a living is hard. The same study found that, "over half hold at least two jobs concurrently; 18 percent are working three or more jobs," and few had the business or marketing skills they needed to start their own business or even to launch their careers.

Art leaders, educators and policymakers need to better understand that the status quo for arts education is missing a few things; specifically, the importance of business savvy and the increasing demand for arts-trained executives. Fortunately, many schools are providing entrepreneurship training -- or at least beginning to do so -- and general business training for art and music majors.

Something else is happening in business and engineering schools alike, i.e., they are integrating arts and sciences to create a more well rounded curriculum but also, laying the foundation for the workforce most corporate executives say will be most in demand in the so-called new economy.

More and more we are beginning to see [that](#) "arts-training is crucial to developing creativity." Creativity leads to innovation, and innovation is America's only path to prosperity and, certainly, survival.