

SABBATICAL LEAVE REPORT

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PROJECT SUMMARY

I commenced my sabbatical leave in the spring semester of 2018. In my application for sabbatical, I outlined my goals for this project, which was to bring myself up to date with current industry practices in Graphic Design. Since becoming a full-time instructor at El Camino College over 15 years ago, I have maintained a small presence in the field of Graphic Design by pursuing outside work as opportunities arose. Despite my diverse activities in Graphic Design, Internet technologies have advanced at a pace never before seen and the way users interact with social media has dramatically affected how these platforms are used today. As a result, my practical industry knowledge had become somewhat antiquated and needed fresh insight into current industry trends.

I chose a course of self-directed study for my sabbatical project with the goals of becoming familiar with the current skills and experience demanded by design colleges and employers, and learning up-to-date practices in web design, print media and art direction. To accomplish this, I divided my 16-week sabbatical into four different segments; each segment was four weeks in duration.

The first four-week segment of my sabbatical, I met with former students and recent graduates from El Camino College who have moved on to art and design colleges and universities or who are working in the design industry. We discussed their experiences in developing portfolios for school and work, the expectations of higher education and employers, and the current demands of clients from design professionals. The second segment was spent shadowing a former student, Seung (Lindsey) Drell, formerly the lead user experience designer for CBS.com, and now working as the Senior UX/UI (User Experience/User Interface) Designer at Emerging Platforms. I gained insight from Lindsey into some of the current practices and demands of web design. The third segment was spent with Don Croucher, owner of Idea Printing in Torrance, CA. Mr. Croucher is a former vendor to my design business, has over 30 years experience in the print industry and provided a wealth of knowledge regarding current industry practices and technology. For the last segment, I worked with Eric Holman, lead Art Director at OPI, a leading manufacturer of nail polish and associated products. Mr. Holman is a former student from El Camino College who went on to graduate from the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA.

WHAT I LEARNED

Industry Expectations, Weeks 1-4

For my research in this area, I spoke with several of my former design students who are currently working in various aspects of the design industry. They currently work or have worked in a number of related fields, including print, web, packaging,

product, motion graphics, photography, exhibit design, signage and identity. Some of my former students continued on to four-year colleges or design schools including: California State University, Long Beach, California State University Dominguez Hills, Otis College of Art and Design and the Art Center College of Design. A few students chose not to pursue a four-year degree and entered the workforce after graduating from El Camino College.

I could not be more pleased and prouder of the many past students I contacted who are now successful young adults employed in their field of study. Each person expressed their heartfelt gratitude for what El Camino College and I had offered them. They were more than happy to share their experience and perception of how to best equip the next generation of designers.

1. Academic Rigor and Being Tough Matters - A common theme was how school didn't prepare them for the rigor and accountability the real world expected. As one student put it, "There is no coloring room" and, "Everyone's not actually a winner on the job." Recent graduates need to understand that if they somehow avoided developing a thick skin in design school, they will have to do so very quickly once they begin working, regardless of whether it is doing freelance or being employed at a design studio. Expectations are always higher than your pay warrants, and the criticism is invariably sharp and to the point.

2. Flexibility in Skills and Expectations - Employers and clients are always asking for something outside of a designer's knowledge or skillset. Anyone wishing to work as a designer must be ready to learn an entirely new skill or body of information in a limited amount of time in order to successfully complete a job within a deadline. Expectations of being able to "express yourself" or do only the kind of work "you" want to do, only means a designer will have difficulty finding work in a tough job market. A very common problem seen by my students in their careers is new graduates who get hired in entry level positions and immediately believe they should be the art director or lead creative on a project. These employees are weeded out of their positions as quickly as possible.
3. Facility with Digital/Social Media - Regardless of the area of specialization, new graduates need to understand how to develop and format creative content for posting on social media and web sites. This holds true for posting a personal portfolio as well as any work requested by an employer or client. The current industry expectation is that any designer working today will already have experience in this area.
4. Be Reliable and Get the Job Done - Employers are looking for designers who can be given an assignment and who understand how to begin, develop and complete it with a minimum of hand-holding within a deadline.
5. Communicate, Communicate, Communicate - It is axiomatic that communication skills are critical to success in any field, however, one complaint my former students expressed was the fact that many of the recent

graduates they had the opportunity to work with did not know how to communicate effectively. Whether it is knowing their place in the job hierarchy, or simply the ability to be sufficiently articulate, this is one of the most common areas in which new graduates are severely lacking.

Web Design, Weeks 5-8

Seung (Lindsey) Drell is the Senior UX/UI Designer of Emerging Platforms, a company dedicated to creating innovative software solutions. Lindsey says some of the biggest changes aren't trying to get employees that understand the user experience. She feels that students either come into the job market with a strong computer background, or have art skills. She rarely sees a combination of both, and she believes this limits the ability of the new hire to effectively solve problems. "I need someone technical who can think outside the box, and someone who thinks like our audience and is economical in the path to complete a task." More followers and less clicks. I believe this is why we are seeing more programs like the pilot program at Santa Monica City College that offers students a Bachelor of Science degree in UX/UI in the College of Fine Arts.

This information is useful to me in the classroom because I am in a position to recommend programs at universities and colleges that are a 'best fit' for individual student's interests and skills. Degrees like the one offered at Santa Monica City College are for jobs of the future as well as today; this particular program boasts job placement for over 90% of the graduating class--before they graduate!

Print Technology, Weeks 9-12

Don Croucher at Idea Printing has seen big changes in his business over the last 20 years. "Printing used to be a complicated process of setting type, color separations, washing printer blankets, stripping and negative plates. Due to digital technology, now documents are sent direct to plate!" In addition to increasingly stream lined, more cost-effective offset printing, much of what was once printed on a press is now simply duplicated on a high-end color copier. With advances in printing technology resulting in the increased quality of color printers, much of the four-color process work that used to be sent out for processing in CMYK on oversized sheets to large Heidelberg presses is now commonly completed in-house on high-end color copy machines. This has lowered costs considerably and keeps jobs in-house. Old Copy machines were limited in their ability to match specific Pantone colors as well as having limited paper options. Now, software programs such as ColorSync match and color correct images and artwork at the machine level, thereby simplifying the process. The ability to use heavier paper such as 60, 80- and 100-pound card stock in any quantity and in a variety of finishes, makes color documents fast and affordable for large and small businesses. FPO's and sign off make-ready can be replaced by seeing exactly what the end user will be receiving at the job completion in a fraction of the time. This is helpful to know as course assignment deliverables can be pushed beyond the camera-ready stage. Student portfolios can now present comps that reflect the actual final piece, and curriculum and classroom lectures can reflect current technology.

Art Direction, Weeks 13-16

Eric Holman, Senior Art Director at OPI, says knowledge of printing and new technology take a back seat to the need for entry-level employees to have problem solving skills, resilience, a work ethic, humility and soft skills that allow them to work well with others on the completion of tasks they may find "not fun or impacting the world on a global scale." He related to me that even new employees who have graduated from high-level design schools have difficulty interacting appropriately in the workplace. Talking out of turn, disrespect and disregard for senior management and their authority are common issues. Having to work on projects they do not find meaningful or important is very difficult and creates friction within the creative team. Mr. Holman said he would much prefer a new employee who did not have quite as much experience or knowledge, but who was reliable, hard working, eager to learn, and had the appropriate soft skills; this was preferable to him over someone who had a higher level of knowledge and experience, but was lacking in the other areas. Developing quality, long-term employees is more important than hiring someone with the perfect design skills but cannot function as part of a team.

THE IMPACT OF MY SABBATICAL ON MY FIELD PROFICIENCY

Like most disciplines, the design industry has undergone dramatic change in the previous 15 years. This sabbatical has provided me fresh insight into those changes and enables me to integrate a forward-looking emphasis on the curriculum and my

teaching style. I believe this will translate into confidence that will benefit my students in the future job markets they seek to enter.