CURRENT UNDERGRADUATE COMPETENCIES
FOR NASAD ACCREDITED PROFESSIONAL DESIGN DEGREE PROGRAMS

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SPECIFIC PROFESSIONAL BACCALAUREATE DEGREES IN DESIGN

The professional undergraduate degree in a design specialization is structured to provide in-depth, formal education that will prepare students for entry into professional practice upon graduation. This is the case whether the degree rubric is Bachelor of Fine Arts with a design specialization or another appropriate title.

Appendix II.A. provides a useful guide to various purposes, issues, and NASAD standards locations applicable to all types of design curricula. It may be especially useful for institutions developing or revising curricular programs in design. For further information about the relationship of the professional undergraduate degree in a design field specialization to other professional and liberal arts degrees, see Appendix II.A., especially Sections 5.and 6.

A. **Common Curricular Elements Incorporated in All Specific Professional Undergraduate Degrees in Design**

Common critical elements in the strategic environment for design impact, are reflected, and are integrated differently in the work of various design specializations, and thus, in the realization of curricular programs to develop the student competencies required to begin professional practice in those specializations.

Specific detailed competency development decisions regarding these common elements are the prerogatives of institutions. However, to maintain fundamental curricular currency with developments in each field, each professional undergraduate program in design is expected to prepare students to understand and work with the following in terms of their area of specialization or focus.

1. **Context.** The role of the designer is not only to achieve the goodness of fit between form and context, but also to determine how much of the surrounding context will be considered as a specific design problem is addressed and solved. Basic competence in both framing and solving design problems is essential for graduates. In all design specializations, this competence includes knowledge of and ability to address the following:

   a. Usefulness. The value of communication, objects, environments, or services to persons and society.
   b. Usability. The cognitive or physical ease, efficiency, and satisfaction of people as they learn and use communication, objects, products, environments, systems, or services.
   c. Desirability. The perceived emotional, social, or cultural benefits of communication, objects, products, environments, systems, or services.
   d. Sustainability. The consequences of design in interdependent systems, lifespan of designed objects, and use and disposal of resources.
   e. Feasibility. The technological ability to produce and/or disseminate and/or distribute communication, objects, environments, or services.
   f. Viability. The economic potential and consequences, for example, for return on investment, economic sustainability, and growth.

2. **Complexity.** The context for design problem solving is increasingly complex and design activity is typically nested within a web of interconnected systems. Basic understanding of how such complexity is addressed and expressed in design practice is essential. Competencies include familiarity with:

   a. Trans-disciplinary/interdisciplinary collaboration. Basic understanding of the nature, content, and process of trans/interdisciplinary work, including experiences working in trans-disciplinary teams toward the solution of design problems. To address critical aspects of the content component, where possible, curricula and courses should facilitate understanding of the relevance of knowledge in a variety of fields associated with addressing complex design issues and problems. Fields include the sciences, social sciences, humanities, and business, and other fields associated with various areas of specialization.

b. Designing at the level of systems. Basic knowledge of means for considering, evaluating, and anticipating the consequences of design action in a variety of systems, even when working at the level of products and components. This competence is normally developed through studio and other studies and activities.

c. Geographic dispersal of effort. Basic understanding of the management and labor structures and issues associated with the design, production, dissemination, and distribution of communication, goods, and services in the global context. Students should be encouraged to gain work experience in settings that represent a variety of economic and social opportunities.

d. Issues of lifespan and sustainability. Ability to justify the use of resources and identify longterm consequences of design action in their solutions to problems.

3. **Designing for and with People.** Contemporary design practice addresses varying levels of responsibility between designers and users. For example, control for design decisions can shift proportionally from project to project. Knowledge and skills to understand and begin to work in this environment are essential. Competencies include the ability to:

a. Choose and apply research and other methods for understanding potential users' wants, needs, and patterns of behavior.

b. Recognize social, cultural, and perspective differences on scales ranging from individual to global.

c. Consider and evaluate strategies for addressing or resolving competing values in the process of finding design solutions.

d. Work with issues and projects associated with participatory design and its processes.

4. **Technology.** A rapidly evolving technological context presents both challenges and opportunities for design education. While the resources of institutions may limit how quickly programs can respond to industry changes in specific software and hardware, overarching knowledge and skills for working with the impact of technology on design are essential. Competencies include the ability to:

a. Learn how to learn technology. Because change will be a constant, students' technological studies and experiences need to prepare them to learn new technologies on an ongoing basis.

b. Make critical choices among different technologies. Through various curricular studies and experiences, students are expected to become critical users of technology, able to match technological choices to specific problems and their respective contexts.

c. Design tools and systems. The democratization of technology places a greater burden on designers in certain specializations to invent the systems through which users create their own experiences. For students majoring in those specializations, competencies include basic understanding of the development of such systems and of the fundamental relationships between the invention of systems and the invention of technology. Experience in projects associated with the invention of technology as well as its use is strongly recommended.

5. **Research.** Research is an integral component in designing for and with people in a context that encompasses complexity and technology. Research sensibilities and comprehensive capabilities are gained through study and practice over a lifetime. At the undergraduate professional degree level, basic understanding of research methods, and the ability to read and use findings in studio projects are essential. This competence includes basic knowledge and skills to develop research-supported design decisions for specific circumstances that address:

a. What people want and need.

b. What is needed that does not exist.

c. How people learn and know.

d. What particular contexts demand.

e. How things get planned, produced, and distributed.

f. The effects of design action on people, communities, the environment, and the future.

g. Tools, theories, and methods for exploring these issues.

B. **Common Essential Resource-based Opportunities and Experiences for All Students Enrolled in Professional Undergraduate Design Degrees.** Institutions must provide the following in terms of each specific specialization or field of design it offers.

1. Easy access to studios appropriately equipped for teaching, learning, and work. See Standards II.F.
2. Easy access to libraries with (1) appropriate design collections in the field of specialization, (2) resources that are current and appropriate to the specific curricula being offered, and (3) reference material in other relevant disciplines, such as the social sciences and the humanities. See Standards II.G.
3. Easy access to tutorials that develop software and other technical capabilities. See Standards IV.B.1.
4. Easy access to appropriately equipped labs and technological support necessary for the execution of design solutions. See Standards II.F.
5. Continuous regular access to instruction and critique under faculty with educational and professional backgrounds in the area of design specialization. Instruction for the number of students enrolled, and sufficient numbers of qualified faculty to provide the diversity of expertise required for a comprehensive current education in the field of specialization. See Standards II.E.

B. **Communication Design.** Communication designers work in static and dynamic formats, such as printbased design, interactive media, and environmental applications to address functional communication needs. They focus on relationships among audience, context, and content. Artifacts and services created by communication designers may interpret, inform, instruct, persuade, or entertain. Communication designers address the physical, cultural, and technological aspects of specific situations and the cognitive and social behaviors of users. They work with integration and process. They have a symbiotic relationship with technology and are both users and drivers of technological innovation. Designers address problems at various scales ranging from project components to complex systems that encompass intersections among communication and various social, cultural, technological, economic, physical, and service contexts.

Only curricular programs with sufficient coursework and competency development in the creation of new visual form, and strategies in which form is critical to achieving communication, are appropriately titled "communication design," "visual communication design," or an equivalent as described in paragraph five below.

Other curricular programs such as those for journalism and mass communications, marketing, management of technology, and graphic applications such as drafting may use the term "communications" in titles and descriptions. However, these programs are distinct from professional undergraduate communication design programs in purpose, content, and graduation requirements. They are identified by different titles. They are not structured to address the formal and thinking competencies at levels that define the creative work of professional communication designers. This distinction between communication design curricular programs and other curricular programs remains even though specific courses normally available through other programs, such as communications theory and concepts, may be valuable for communication design students.

Only professional undergraduate degree programs structured to develop the composite set of competencies listed in item X.C.3. below prepare students for entry-level professional practice in communication design. Such programs must be represented and taught primarily by instructors with appropriate communication design education and professional experience. Normally, such programs require at least four years of full-time study or the equivalent. Titles normally used to identify four-year professional programs with a major structured to prepare students for entry-level professional practice are Bachelor of Fine Arts in Communication Design, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design, Bachelor of Fine Arts in Advertising Design, Bachelor of Communication Design, or Bachelor of Graphic Design. See also Standards for Accreditation VII.B.2. Other communication-based design specializations such as interaction design, experience design wayfinding, and information design may be designated as majors or emphases. Such programs are reviewed using communication design standards and must include sufficient content requirements in the field designated as a major or area of emphasis.

Only institutions with a sufficient number of qualified communication design faculty, technological resources, a comprehensive curriculum, and core and specialized courses in communication design have the prerequisites to offer these degrees or other degrees with different titles having objectives to prepare students for entry-level professional practice in communication design.

1. **Curricular Structure**

a. Standard. Curricular structure, content, and time requirements shall enable students to develop the range of knowledge, skills, and competencies expected of those holding a professional baccalaureate degree in communication design as indicated below and in Standards VIII.

b. Guidelines. Curricula to accomplish this purpose that meet the standards previously indicated normally adhere to the following structural guidelines: studies in communication design comprise 25-35% of the total program; supportive courses in design, related technologies, and NASAD Handbook 2016-17 the visual arts, 20-30%; studies in art/design histories and theory, 10-15%; and general studies, 25-35%. Studies in the major area; supportive courses in design, related technologies, and the visual arts; and studies in visual arts/design histories and theory normally total at least 65% of the curriculum (see Standards III.C. regarding forms of instruction, requirements, and electives).

2. **Recommendations for General Studies** (see VIII.A.6.). Curricular requirements and strong advising should direct students to general studies that support their study in design. Appropriate areas of study for all communication design majors include communication theory, writing, psychology, sociology, anthropology and cultural studies, and business, as well as the humanities.

Designers benefit from studies that develop understandings of globalization in terms of its various meanings for design practice. Professional degree programs with a specific focus such as advertising, design planning/management, interactive media, should require or strongly recommend study in relevant areas, such as marketing, economics, organizational psychology, human factors, systems theory, or computer science. Coursework in the major should make use of concepts and skills acquired through study in areas other than design.

3. **Essential Competencies, Opportunities, and Experiences** (in addition to those stated for all professional degree programs in Standards VIII.B. and C.):

a. The ability to conceive and to design visual communications and systems involving various integrations of the elements of professional practice outlined in items 3.b. through g. below.
b. Understanding and use of basic visual communication principles and processes, including but not limited to:

   (1) Understanding of how communication theories, principles, and processes have evolved through history and the ability to use this knowledge to address various types of contemporary problems.
   (2) Understanding of and ability to develop strategies for planning, producing, and disseminating visual communications.
   (3) Functional knowledge of creative approaches, and the analytical ability to make appropriate, purpose-based choices among them, and to use such approaches to identify communication opportunities and generate alternative solutions.
   (4) Ability to plan the design process and construct narratives and scenarios for describing user experiences.
   (5) Fluency in the use of the formal vocabulary and concepts of design—including content, elements, structure, style, and technology—in response to visual communication problems. Studies in critical theory and semiotics are strongly recommended.
   (6) Ability to develop informed considerations of the spatial, temporal, and kinesthetic relationships among form, meaning, and behavior and apply them to the development of various types of visual communication design projects.
   (7) Ability to use typography, images, diagrams, motion, sequencing, color, and other such elements effectively in the contexts of specific design projects.

c. Ability to incorporate research and findings regarding people and contexts into communication design decision-making, including but not limited to:

   (1) Ability to frame and conduct investigations in terms of people, activities, and their settings, including, but not limited to using appropriate methods for determining people's wants, needs, and patterns of behavior, and developing design responses that respect the social and cultural differences among users of design in local and global contexts.
   (2) Understanding of design at different scales, ranging from components to systems and from artifacts to experiences.
   (3) Ability to exercise critical judgment about the student's own design and the design of others with regard to usefulness, usability, desirability, technological feasibility, economic viability, and sustainability in terms of long-term consequences.

d. Acquisition of collaborative skills and the ability to work effectively in interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary teams to solve complex problems.

e. Understanding of and the ability to use technology, including but not limited to:

(1) Functional understanding of how to continue learning technology, recognizing that technological change is constant.
(2) Ability to conduct critical evaluations of different technologies in specific design problem contexts, including the placement of technical issues in the service of human-centered priorities and matching relationships between technologies and the people expected to use them.
(3) Functional capability to shape and create technological tools and systems to address communication problems and further communication goals.
(4) Ability to recognize and analyze the social, cultural, and economic implications of technology on message creation and production and on human behavior, and to incorporate results into design decisions.

f. Understanding of and ability to use basic research and analysis procedures and skills, including but not limited to:

(1) Acquisition of research capabilities and skills such as using databases, asking questions, observing users, and developing prototypes.
(2) Ability to use analytical tools to construct appropriate visual representations in the execution of research activities.
(3) Ability to interpret research findings practically and apply them in design development.
(4) Ability to support design decisions with quantitative and qualitative research findings at various stages of project development and presentation.

g. Functional knowledge of professional design practices and processes, including but not limited to professional and ethical behaviors and intellectual property issues such as patents, trademarks, and copyrights.

h. Experience in applying design knowledge and skills beyond the classroom is essential. Opportunities for field research and experience, internships, collaborative programs with professional and industry groups, and international experiences are strongly recommended. Such opportunities to become oriented to the working profession should be supported through strong advising.

4. **Relevant Competency Recommendations for Specialized Programs** (in addition to those stated above for all communication design programs, and those stated for all professional degree programs):

a. For communication design programs with a special emphasis in advertising, design experiences should include the application of communication theory, planning of campaigns, audience/user evaluation, market testing, branding, art direction, and copyrighting, as well as the formal and technical aspects of design and production.

b. For communication design programs with a special emphasis in design planning and strategy, design experiences should include working in interdisciplinary teams, using existing and planning original research, systems-level analysis and problem solving, writing for business, developing understandings of business/design interfaces, and the application of management, communication, and information theories.

5. **Essential Resource-based Opportunities.** See Standards for Accreditation X.B.

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General Requirements: Design. The competencies outlined below are essential in enabling degree holders to combine and synthesize critical elements associated with advanced, highly skilled, analytically-based studio work in design.

    a.   Advanced professional competence in a specific design specialization or some aspect of studio-based design practice.

    b.   Professional depth of knowledge and achievement demonstrated by a significant body of studio-based design work.

    c.   Ability to integrate and synthesize information associated with an area of specialization, including the ability to reach and articulate conclusions as an individual designer.

    d.   In-depth understanding of the consequences of design in various contexts, including those that involve relationships among the elements of complex interacting systems; and the ability to frame and conduct investigations of such systems in relationship to design practice.

    e.   Ability to explore and develop design methods and tools that are appropriate to supporting collaborative work, engaging human-subject research, and addressing complex problems.

    f.   Ability to apply existing research methods from professional design practice and make judgments about the appropriateness of specific research methods and strategies for the specific nature of a design task.

    g.   Ability to conceive and produce studio work that is speculative and propositional; for example, what design can achieve economically, socially, culturally, and technologically.

    h.   Ability to integrate into design practice the knowledge, perspectives, and values gained through the study of design precedents, fields related to design, and modes of inquiry in design and other fields.

    i.   Ability to use analytical tools, design processes, technologies, and bibliographical resources to develop concepts, reveal patterns of information, and create rationales for specific design solutions or projects.

    j.   Ability to communicate clearly in speech and writing about design practice and research to the public and various professional communities.

    k.   Understanding of the nature of leadership in design practice and functional development of the organizational and critical skills necessary to assume such leadership.

Preparation for Teaching Design. Basic understanding of, and experience in, curriculum and pedagogy in preparation for college teaching is strongly recommended for all candidates for the MFA in Design. Associated mentoring by experienced design teachers is also strongly recommended.

When preparation for teaching is published as a significant goal of a particular program, curriculum and pedagogy knowledge and skills are essential, and academic studies in design or related fields should occupy at least 20% of the total credits for the degree.

Historical knowledge of the evolution of design education from craft to profession, including current developments that alter professional expectations, is essential.

Reflection on the teaching/learning paradigm, clarity in teaching goals relative to the curriculum, and appropriate original research to assess learning and adjust teaching strategies are desirable.

Program Components: Design. Specific programs and procedures applicable to awarding the MFA degree are determined by the institution. Standards and guidelines providing a framework for these specific decisions are outlined in Standards XIV.C. The necessary components of Master of Fine Arts degrees are:

a. Advanced studio practice.
b. Academic studies concerned with design and design-associated research, including, as appropriate, studies in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences.
c. Work in both studio and academic studies that fosters abilities to integrate knowledge and skills associated with art/design practice and to make connections and integrations with other fields appropriate to the individual's program of study.