

Graphic Design:
An Adaptive Field as a Product of Time



Michigan State University

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Professor Barbara Gerber

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What is not designed? Pamphlets, products, posters: all painstakingly created by graphic designers and digital artists. Graphic design, in fact, is so widespread, it faces a near lack of identity. Katherine McCoy states that the field has “held sway” as an “art, a science, a business, [and] a craft” at different points in time (1990, p. 4). I personally prefer former University of Alberta professor Jorge Frascara’s umbrella definition: “Graphic design is the activity that organizes visual communication in society” (1988, p. 3). Despite its variety of applications, a graphic designer’s job is primarily communication. That is truly the reason for the current thriving industry; in an era of instantaneous mass communication through the internet, the role of the graphic designer as a medium for mass visual communication has never been so important.

The demand for digital designers was sparked largely by the “dot-com” bubble of the late 1990s to early 2000s. Prior to the internet, design jobs mainly lied in print and some telecommunications industries. The typical need for print designers mainly consisted of corporate (logos, branding, etc.) and collateral (pamphlets, posters, etc.) design (Vit & Gomez Palacio, 2009, pp. 24–43). The early internet was a completely new frontier, and print designers eagerly capitalized on it. These early designers defined the conventions of the modern internet, primarily designing webpages that mimicked the look of traditional print media. Despite the early adoption of web and UI design by previous print designers, there were not enough designers to meet the demand of companies keen to taking advantage of the high profitability of the early internet.

This demand created jobs for thousands of designers; according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the amount of graphic designers nearly doubled between 1999 and 2007, the height of the dot-com bubble (see Figure 1) (n.d.-b). During this period, graphic design jobs increased at a much higher rate than the rate of overall employment. However, during the period of 2009-2013, the Graphic Design industry experienced a small recession. The dot-com bubble had burst, and investors and businesses alike found the internet as a much less lucrative venture. The industry has since been in a slight recession due to the current oversaturation of the field.

Despite this, Graphic Design wages have continuously risen over the past two decades. From the years 2000 to 2021, the annual mean wage rose from \$38,000 to \$60,000. When compared with the Consumer Price Index, a common means for calculating general inflation, wages have risen fairly proportionally to the rising



Figure 2: Cumulative graphic design wage increase relative to the CPI in the US from 1999-2021

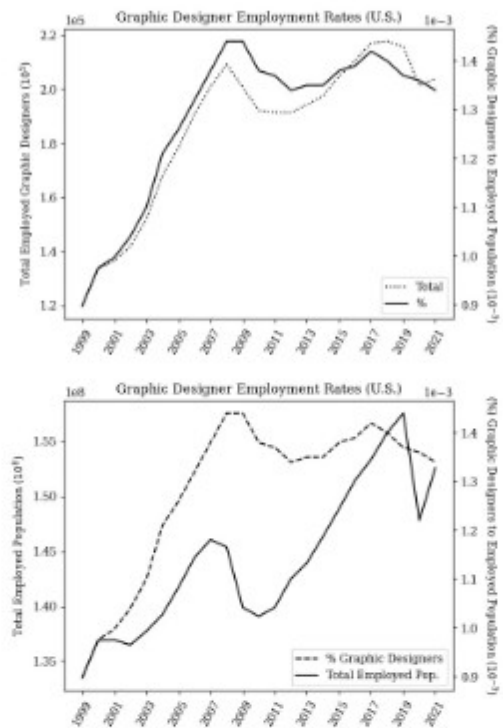


Figure 1: Graphic design employment rates in the US from 1999-2021

price of goods (see Figure 2) (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-a). From 2019 to 2021, however, there has been a somewhat dramatic increase in wages relative to the rate of inflation. This suggests that graphic design could be a more advantageous career to enter in the coming years, if this trend is to continue. That being said, a similar increase can be seen from 1999 to 2001, only for the wages to then decrease the following year, and continue to follow the rate of inflation.

The salary is generally not the most lucrative part of being a graphic designer. The mean annual salary in the US in 2021 was \$59,970, only \$1,690 over the average of all occupations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b). One consideration may be, however, how this average is brought down. For many graphic designers, the occupation is not the end goal, but rather a stepping stone into another field. It is not unusual for graphic designers to progress into becoming art directors or UI/UX designers, whose annual means were \$115,430 and \$95,460 respectively (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.-b).

Before entering the field, it is imperative to first understand the role. The role of a graphic designer can be split into two main categories: print and digital. As previously mentioned, the main role of print designers has historically been creating corporate and/or collateral designs, with subcategories such as branding, iconography, poster design, environmental design, etc (Vit & Gomez Palacio, 2009, pp. 24–43). Although some forms of print media, such as magazines and newspapers, are being phased out in favor of digital equivalents, all of these forms of design are still used heavily today. When entering the industry, one can expect to deal heavily in most, if not all of them. The fundamental basis of composition defined in these print media is the use of the grid (Dabner et al., 2009, p. 42; Vit & Gomez Palacio, 2009, p. 50). The grid defines a structure through which text, images, and other elements can be aligned. As print designers played a heavy role in the development of the internet, this grid has also become essential to web design and digital graphics. It has not, however, remained stagnant. As interface designers have to deal with a wide variety of screen sizes and aspect ratios, the grid has become adaptive, able to change to fit the screen (Tselentis, 2012, pp. 74–77).

Traditionally, graphic design was taught in formal institutions as essentially a vocational training program (Swanson, 1994, p. 53). Students were essentially taught the tools necessary for the job, and little more. This seemingly makes sense; according to Chiang, employers “do not see the industry as a ‘training ground’”, and expect complete competency when entering into the professional world (2018,

p. 73). As such, employers do not typically provide training for Junior designers, expecting designers to have already received somewhat extensive training.

In contemporary design education, however, this ethos has began to change. In recent years, prominent figures in academia have begun to question whether such “‘skill-based training’ can be appropriately called ‘education’” (Chiang, 2018, p. 75). Adam Taylor, assistant professor of graphic design at Michigan State University, stressed this point in our interview. He states, “It’s just as important to know how to learn as a designer as it is to know what to learn” (personal communication, April 6, 2023). This emphasis on “continued learning” has been a large focus since the beginning of the digital age. As the tools designers use have drastically changed over the last few decades, education has had to adapt with it.

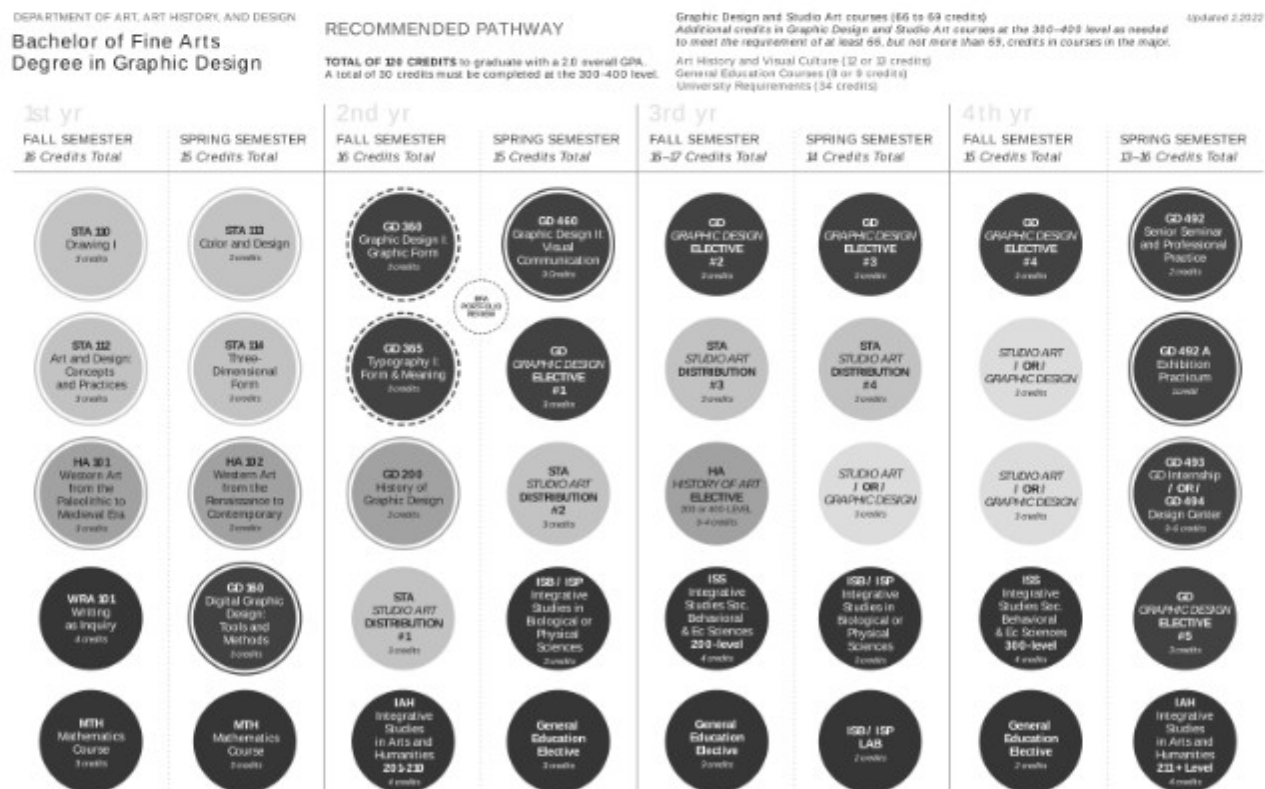


Figure 3: Michigan State University Graphic Design BFA curriculum map

Michigan State University (MSU), like most major universities, exemplifies characteristics of both the traditional and contemporary modes of instruction in its course curriculum. Like nearly all formal institutions, the Department of Art, Art History, and Design (AAHD) at MSU requires a baseline understanding of the fundamentals before learning more complex design concepts. As the underlying tools which all design relies on are the fundamentals of art and the principles of design (Dabner et al., 2009, p. 34), these courses are critical to all design education. MSU strongly recommends all students take the following within their first year: Drawing I (STA 110), Art and Design: Concepts and Practices (STA 112), Color and Design (STA 113), and Three-Dimensional Form (STA 114) (Michigan State University, n.d.-b) (see Figure 3). These courses exemplify a contemporary focus, as rather than teaching skills vital to designing professionally, they instead teach courses applicable to all areas of art.

Following the fundamentals, however, students are expected to take courses more specific to digital graphic tools. At MSU, students take courses in graphic form, digital tools, and typography. These align to a more traditional view of design education, as they teach standard tools and methods used in the industry. However, within these courses, there is a recognition for the importance of continued learning. In his Graphic Design I, Typography I, and Typography II courses for instance, Adam Taylor expressed his strong emphasis on not just learning the tools, but learning how to learn design (personal communication, April 6, 2023). Importantly, this teaches students to be lifelong learners. This is essential to a comprehensive design education because “[t]he skills that students gain from their study may become obsolete after they graduate” (Chiang, 2018, p. 75). Furthermore, MSU encourages students to become multi-faceted artists and designers through their curriculum. This can be seen in the inclusion of electives, generally courses that fall outside the scope of graphic design (Michigan State University, n.d.-a). These courses demonstrate a contemporary style of curriculum as they push students to learn more than the typically applicable abilities, which furthers students capabilities in learning new skills.

From a pragmatic standpoint, I find the most important aspects of attending MSU for graphic design to be the focus on community, the portfolio, and internships. In our interview, Taylor describes that cohorts of fellow students are able to motivate each other in a way entirely separate from a professor (personal communication, April 6, 2023). I completely agree, I've found that my fellow students have been my biggest exposure to different modes of not only designing, but approaching problems in general. Compared to my prior self-study, study at university has accelerated my learning, particularly in unfamiliar and diverse directions. In addition, from the fundamental courses MSU requires students to begin building their portfolios. Portfolios are essential to graphic designers in industry, particularly those with little to no experience. In a study on UK graphic designer advertisements, Dziobczenski and Person found that 56% of employers required references to past experience, and 41.3% required a portfolio of past work (2017, p. 45). Although a portfolio isn't required to get a job, it opens up a large venue of opportunities, all while having students further hone their skills. Dziobczenski's findings also prove the importance of the required internship. As 56% of employers require references to past experiences, the resources provided by MSU for finding and applying for an internship are vital. Requiring an internship opens up students to over half of the available job offers after graduation. That being said, not all students choose to enter the industry immediately after graduation. Many, in fact, choose to pursue an MFA (Masters of Fine Arts) program, which typically hones in on a particular area of design (Brower, 2014, p. 47). Whether students choose to enter the industry directly, or apply for further education, attending a post-secondary institution like MSU seems to be largely beneficial to those looking to become graphic designers.

Not every graphic designer chooses to attend a formal institution, however. With the average cost of tuition for an academic year being \$13,677 for post-secondary institutions in the US (Digest of Education Statistics, 2022), for many, attending college is not fiscally viable. In addition, many find self-study to be more beneficial and time efficient as well. In fact, Dziobczenski found in his UK study

that portfolios are more important than degrees in many instances, and states that only 27.8% of job offers required designers to have a degree (Dziobczenski & Person, 2017, pp. 45–50). Chiang goes so far as to say that a degree may even be counterproductive, citing how employers in Ghana have found university graduates to lack “exposure to the standards of practice in design industry” (2018, p. 73). Undeniably, a degree is not a completely necessary requirement to becoming a graphic designer, and many, if not most, designers will not attend a formal institution. However, as Taylor points out, there are some aspects of education that cannot be easily gained in the field. He argues that although a plethora of knowledge and resources exist for free on the internet, formal educational institutes have the benefit of decades of skills and modes of thinking that have been passed down generation to generation (A. Taylor, personal communication, April 6, 2023). Although mentors do exist in the field, employers expect their designers to be industry-ready on hire, and will rarely provide training to expose graphic designers to different techniques. As such, learning diverse modes of thinking is much more difficult without doing some form of post-secondary education.

Although the graphic design industry is always changing, many aspects of design and design education have remained static. Foundational skills focused on the fundamentals of art and principles of design have been, and likely will continue to be, one of the largest focuses of design education. However, the field will likely continue to develop in the direction of continued learning, as well as teaching auxiliary skills to widen the breadth of graduates’ knowledge. In the industry, although wages aren’t high, and the field currently seems oversaturated, graphic design will likely continue to be a stable field with high demand due to its variety of applications. The world needs designers, and even if the positions, trends, and tools all change, graphic design will continually remain integral to society.

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