

# WHY ART AND DESIGN SCHOOLS ARE RISK AVERSE, ARE NOT RELEVANT AND DESTINED TO FAIL DEVELOPING STRATEGIES TO BUILD PARTNERSHIPS AND FORCE THE ACADEMIE INTO COMMUNITY, AND THEN ASK FOR FORGIVENESS

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## **Abstract**

Traditional art and design curriculum revolves around instructing individual students and evaluating students' individual projects without considering that the student's future professional life and success will require that he or she function in a complex design environment with multi-faceted levels of relationships. Educators' focus on, and the institution rewards, nurturing the 'me' designer while the professional world requires that a designer operates as 'we' and 'us' and understands the needs of clients.

The world has become much smaller and more interconnected and at the same time more fragile, volatile and disenfranchised. As art and design institutions concentrate on preserving the institutional bubble, those barriers prevent students from understanding the importance of their role and comprehending the valuable contribution they can make as a designer in the global economy and society, either on a local or international level.

For the past nine years, I have developed classes which operate on a different paradigm—a paradigm where students are forced to get out of their academic comfort zones, come to grips with complex, "real world" global issues, resulting in a greater understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of art and design. These classes have also allowed the institution to see the value and benefit of having students become local and global ambassadors.

These classes rely on partnerships that have been made with researchers from the Johns Hopkins University's Urban Health Institute and the Bloomberg School for Public Health, educational institutions and organizations in the Middle East, and community organizations and communities. The objective of these classes has been to understand and translate important, yet complex research projects and deliver creative solutions to disenfranchised, poverty-stricken and neglected inner city communities, to prepare students to function in multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural teams, and to understand how the designer exists and functions within these different groups. These creative solutions have translated research projects about inner city gun violence, gang involvement, type two-diabetes, hypertension, chronic depression, and religious and cultural understanding. The results of the final projects are mutually beneficial to all constituents.

The paper will address specific topics in the form of case studies as well as highlight the strengths and weakness of working with groups that have different needs and objectives. The paper will showcase two recent projects; one project educates viewers about life in a Somali Muslim community, and the other project focuses on encouraging inner city women to breast feed their children. Each case study will give an overview of the pedagogical structure of these classes.

The classes have a proven track record of connecting the community bed to the institutional bench. These classes have built capacity to connect to other academic institutions and organizations to create similar projects and partnerships.

Keywords: Design, community, social, collaborative, inner city.

## **INTRODUCTION: GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION**

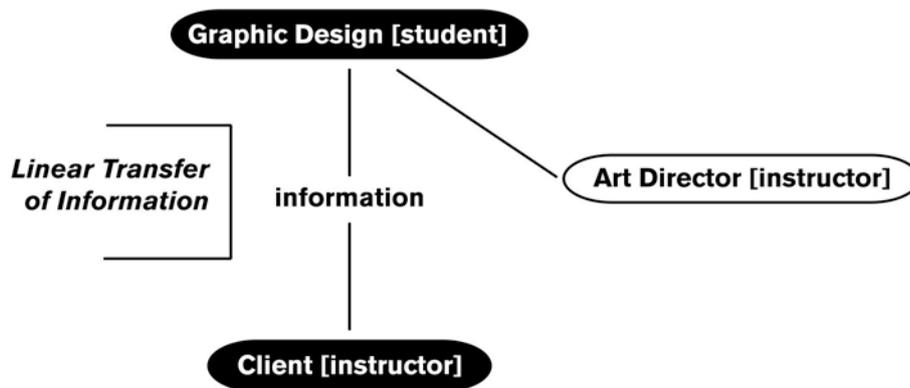
Graphic Design education has always been fraught with pedagogical dilemmas. These problems are, in part, due to the divide between the student's desire to engage in the design profession and an instructor's focus on assignment delivery. Students seek a realistic and professional educational experience, which is not only important to their education, but also necessary for acquiring the appropriate skills to enter a competitive field. Graphic Design instructors, on the other hand, are faced with the complicated task of giving students both technical and theoretical skills in a discipline that

needs to be sequential and linked. The introduction of the computer into Graphic Design has further complicated this educational structure as it has added another layer of instructional demand onto both students and instructors. The resulting assignments end up being ‘artificial’ projects with open, generous, and artificial parameters and easily achievable time constraints. If instructors buck this pedagogical trend and attempt to implement real-world projects, they are faced with the struggle of first finding an appropriate client and project, second identifying a workable budget, and third engaging a willing client committed to enriching the educational experience of the students. The result has been the implementation of various identity design assignments, which fit neatly into the academic structure, yet lack the professional benefits necessary for the students’ development. Thus, the students end up lacking experience in client management, project management, team-centered solutions, engaging target audiences, and developing multiple delivery vehicles—ultimately missing the opportunity to create workable design solutions for the real world.

It is hoped that this paper will illustrate how professional practice can be introduced and sustained within the framework of design education, and provide educators with an appropriate model that can be implemented at their academic institutions. This paper will also address a new area of education that partners academic institutions with other academic institutions and community organizations.

The educational delivery in design schools has changed very little in the last thirty years, even though the design profession has changed drastically. The gap between educational instruction and professional development has become wider and wider with each passing year, and academic institutions have either resisted or been incapable of changing to meet these trends.

The design educational structure is divided by academic years, by semesters, and by classes.<sup>1</sup> Many American design programs operate on a sixteen-week semester, where students attend a selection of studio and academic classes; and the students’ choices are, largely, controlled by their academic year. Each class is sequenced and structured into modules where one skill set builds upon the next. There is usually one design instructor for every class, consisting of about eighteen students; all students are from the same major and the same academic semester. The instructor delivers the educational content of the class through a series of specific learning objectives that are organized by design projects. The project is presented to the entire class, and the project content attempt to simulate an art director’s relationship to a design team in a professional studio. The instructor switches between a teacher, an art director, and a client as the project develops, but ultimately the transfer of information is linear—from teacher to student—with a focus on the student as being ‘me’ or the ‘I.’



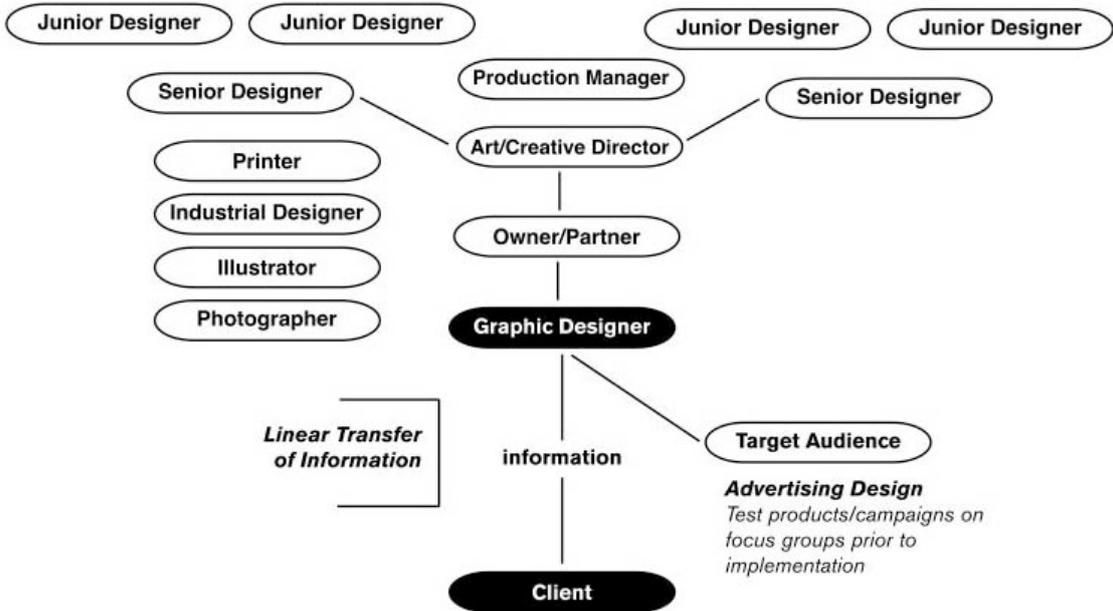
**Figure 1 Graphic Design Education**

This framework has become the accepted model of graphic design education where the instructor acts as client and student as designer. The graphic design instructor switches between client and art director. The informational process is linear between student and instructor and the projects are mainly theoretical and based either upon pedagogical needs or the instructor’s experience.

## **THE GRAPHIC DESIGN PROFESSION**

<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, my discussion is limited to design studio classes and does not discuss academic or liberal arts classes.

The graphic design profession is a complex, organic, multidisciplinary and interconnected structure. The design studio structure is hierarchical. The first layer comprises of either a company partner or principal owner, dependent on the size of the organization. A principal's primary responsibility is to drive the financing and mission of the studio as well as meeting and nurturing existing and prospective clients. The next layer consists of either an art or creative director who manages a creative team of senior and junior designers as well as production artists and student interns. This individual is responsible for the creative output of the team and may meet with clients along with the principal or individually. The design teams switch around dependent on the needs of a specific project, and the focus is more on "us, them" and "we" with less of a focus on "me" and "I." All projects are client-based and dependent on everyone working together and cooperating. Although one could argue that the initial transfer of information is linear—from the client to the creative point person, the information delivery within the design agency is cross-pollinated within multidisciplinary teams.



**Figure 2 Graphic Design Professions**

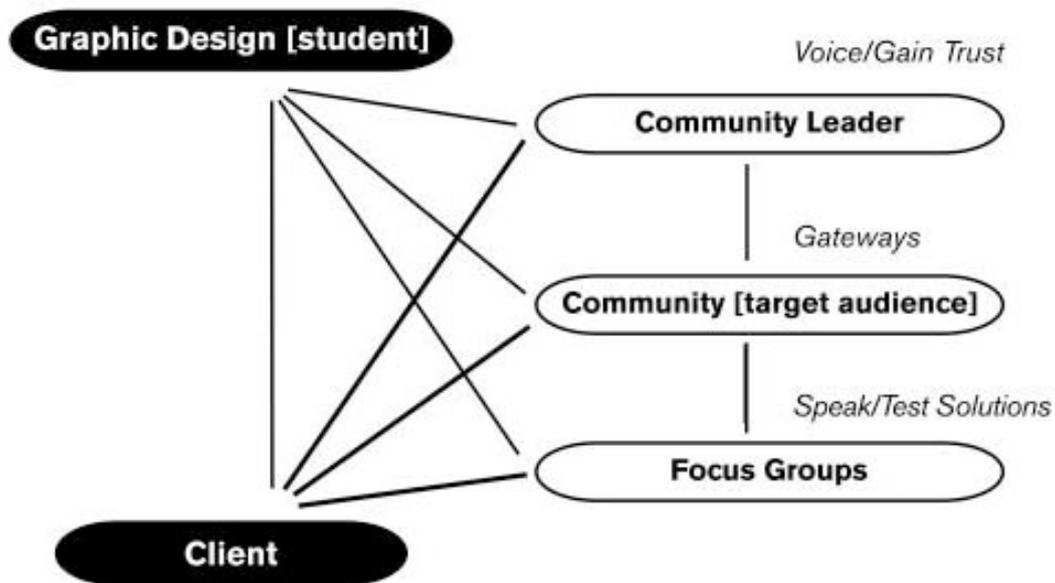
This is a basic framework for a professional design studio. There is a linear informational process between client and owner/partner, with a much more interconnected informational structure within the creative teams. It is important to note that some personnel, for example, production managers, have specific areas of expertise, but for the most part the studio operates as multidisciplinary teams. All projects are client-driven.

It is apparent that design education contradicts design practice, resulting in a lack of professional preparation and skills for the student. It is also apparent that design education is failing to educate students in a manner that prepares them to be design leaders and innovators in their profession, community and on a global basis. The institution continues to focus inwardly and think myopically whilst the design world requires global thinkers who are outwardly looking and able to understand complex problems. There is a continual need to develop educational structures that addressed these imbalances.

**NEW DIRECTIONS AND APPROACHES**

Between 2002 and 2009, I was the graphic design co-chair at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) in Baltimore, Maryland, on the East Coast of the United States. In 2002, at the request of Johns Hopkins University School of Public Health (JHSPH), to address JHSPH's desire to communicate their health research results to the community in which JHSPH is located within, I developed a studio course called the "MICA/JHU Design Coalition"—a course that met the

professional–practice desires of the students as well as addressing the pedagogical concerns of the instructor. It was hoped that the class would create an educational model that was closer to the design profession.



**Figure 3 Theoretical Class**

This was the theoretical framework for the expected MICA/JHU Design Coalition Class. It was hoped that the class would develop a structure that was similar to the design profession. You can see that although there is a linear informational link between client and graphic design student, there is a much more complex and interlinked informational links between all other constituents.

East Baltimore, where JHSPH is located, is a poverty–stricken, predominantly African American, urban neighborhood that begins a few miles from the MICA campus. The neighborhood has high infant mortality rates and disproportionately high syphilis and heroin indices. East Baltimore is a violent place to live, has a plethora of single parent homes, and high rates of unemployment. Less than half the children graduate from high school and one quarter of the households fall below the federal poverty level, reflected in the statistic that one in three children live in poverty in East Baltimore. In addition, the lead poisoning statistics in Baltimore City (much of which is concentrated in East Baltimore) have been consistently high for generations. The citizens are prone to depression, drug addiction, hypertension, obesity, and diabetes. Because the challenges of daily life within East Baltimore are so intense, people have difficulty prioritizing long-term health issues.

This statistical information indicated that, to best communicate with this hard–to–reach community, messages must be delivered in a clear manner decipherable by those with an average reading level of below the sixth grade.

## **MICA COURSE**

The MICA/JHU Design Coalition was an elective course offered every semester to the entire MICA student population. The graphic design department anticipated that this approach would allow students to self-select the course, reflecting their level of commitment to the course. It was hoped that students in other majors would also enroll in the course as it was not clear that graphic design would always be the appropriate delivery vehicle to address the needs of the client and community. Students from other majors might also contribute other methods of problem solving to the class and provide alternative project solutions. The hope was to always have a diverse student population and a socially responsible partnership between the three communities involved in the projects–viz: JHSPH, MICA and East Baltimore. A key asset of this course was that the students could potentially get their work

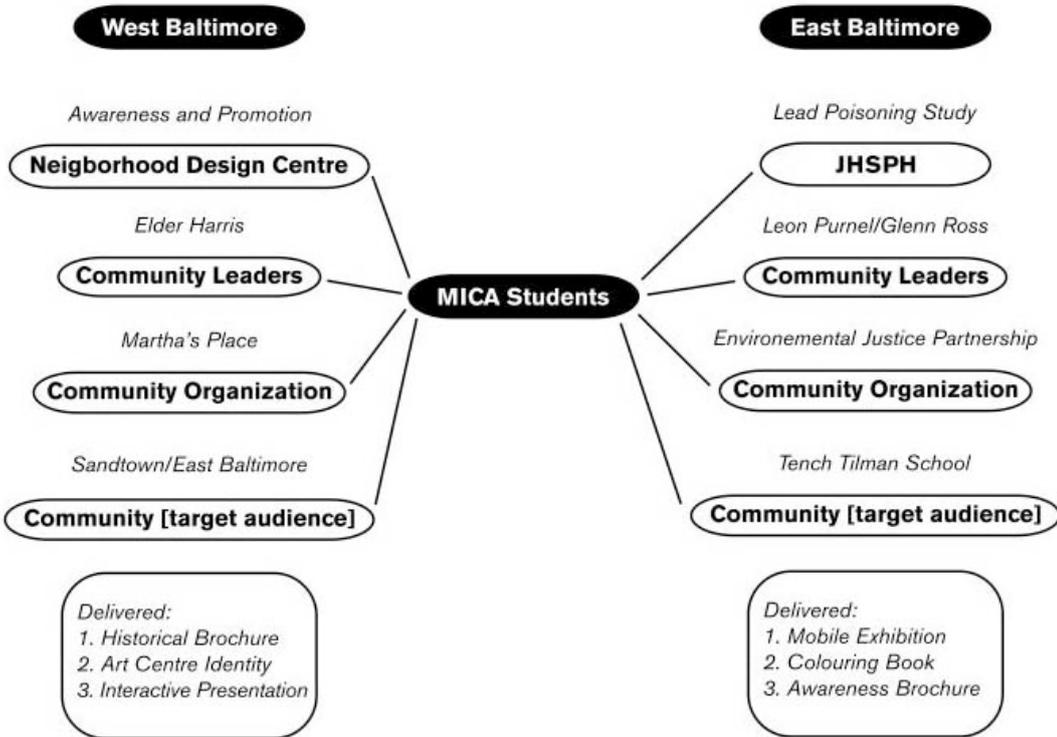
published. In fact, students expressed the primary reason for taking the course was to engage with the client and interact with the community and getting published was secondary consideration.

On the first day of class, the students were instructed on the differences between client, community, and community leaders. The instructor instilled the importance of building crucial connections between students, community leaders and the target audience, in order to inspire an actual change of behavior in the target audience, leading to an improved quality of life.

Later that day, students met with the JHSPH researchers (the client) who present their research projects and discussed their goals for disseminating results. After the clients' presentation, MICA students went on a walking tour of East Baltimore. These walking tours were lead by Baltimore community leaders familiar with the community and its members. The walking tour strategy proved mutually beneficial, as the community awareness of the MICA/JHSPH partnership increased and the students could demonstrate a tangible understanding of life in East Baltimore.

It is important to note that the graphic design department paid the community leader for the services of the community tour. The graphic design department also recognized that the community should be involved at each stage of the process. Furthermore, the project should utilize the already existing community organizations as "community gateways" (discussed below) for testing possible design solutions and for disseminating information.

For the second class, students were asked to research background information regarding the clients' presentations and the target audience. The students then presented their findings to the individual JHSPH research teams (on the fourth class) to ensure that the students' understanding of the nature of the project was in line with JHSPH goals. The students did not show creative strategies at this stage. This approach was beneficial to both JHSPH researchers and MICA students.



**Figure 4 Actual Outcomes of MICA/JHU Design Coalition Class**

The actual framework for the MICA/JHU Design Coalition Class was much different than was expected. Students were involved with different groups and different projects and involved at different levels all at the same time. For example, one student could be a project manager one project and a copywriter on another whilst being a creative designer on another and a fundraiser on the final project. Students who took this class were much more prepared for the design profession.

## **MICA CASE STUDY—BREAST FEEDING PROJECT**

Prior to the start of the fall 2008 semester, the MICA graphic design department was contacted by The Urban Health Institute at Johns Hopkins University (UHI) to see if we were interested in partnering with them on a specific research project they were conducting. UHI is a research organization that generates a variety of research projects specifically focusing on health issues in urban environments. The UHI director, Doctor Chris Gibbons, had heard of the community work that the MICA/JHU Design Coalition had been providing to various East Baltimore community organizations and felt that we could provide design expertise to his research. The research project aim was to increase the numbers of women breastfeeding within the African American community in East Baltimore. Within the community, there was a great deal of negative association revolving around breastfeeding. Even though breast milk was more nutritious and cheaper than formulae, women continued to use formulae because formulae was given to the baby in the hospital and each mother was given a limited, free supply of formulae after they left the hospital. It was difficult to get the mothers to feed their children naturally after that the free supply of formulae was exhausted. Also, the community historically had spread negative stereotypes regarding breastfeeding. In the second week, the students attended a meeting with a local governmental organization called Healthy Start whose mission was to educate young African American mothers about breastfeeding as well as to dispel myths. Healthy Start was chosen to provide feedback for our project. The students spent several weeks interviewing expectant mothers, concentrating on understanding their negative perceptions of breastfeeding, as well as identifying what magazines, music and fashion the mothers were interested in.

The students created a youth magazine that promoted breastfeeding and provided women in East Baltimore with positive breastfeeding role models. The youth magazine targeted moms aged 12 to 25 in the community. The magazine included photographs of East Baltimore mothers, bold graphic shapes, bright colors, and decorative typefaces with easy-to-read text. The text was informative, but not overwhelming. The typographic style was created in response to listening to the young women. For example, the typography was an amalgam of tattoo styles and fonts that appeared in the magazines that the young women were reading. The intent of the publication was to reinforce positive role models through real stories of young women who were breastfeeding as well as to dispel negative myths while increasing self-esteem and self-awareness.

By week fourteen, they had finalized a sixteen-page two-color photo publication that they wanted to share with a focus group comprised of several young women involved in Healthy Start's programs. The class arranged the day and time and prepared for the presentation. The group was to be served a healthy lunch as well as receiving payment for their time. The focus group failed to go as expected because the number of women volunteering for the group was not limited and had increased beyond for what had been budgeted. There was a break down between all parties—UHI, Healthy Start, the students, and the focus group regarding the lack of payment and ultimately the lack of trust, resulting in the project being uncompleted.

In hindsight, we should have cancelled the meeting in order to wait for adequate funding. But, our desire to show the target audience the publication and to avoid letting down the focus group and Healthy Start by postponing the meeting led to a meeting that ultimately ended the project. Although there was not a satisfactory outcome to this project, lessons concerning working with community, investing in real projects and real clients was a valuable lesson learned by all.

## **MCAD ADVANCED SENIOR SEMINAR CLASS**

In August 2009, I moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, a mid-western city in the United States, to assume the Design Chair position at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design (MCAD). Although Minneapolis is much more of a multicultural city than Baltimore, it is predominantly white. The communities surrounding the MCAD campus comprise of Arabic and African Muslims, Hispanics, Vietnamese Hmong, Liberian and African Americans. However, many things remained the same. The surrounding communities are impoverished and disenfranchised, and the MCAD community remains within its institutional bubble. This academic isolation was reflected by a lack of a community-focused social design classes. I decided to use an existing class, Advanced Senior Seminar, as a test case to see if students would be receptive to engaging communities, and, by the same token, if the community would embrace the institution. Unlike in Baltimore, I did not have an establish community collaborator as I did with Johns Hopkins University or identified community leaders. On the first day of class, the students divided into four groups with each group identifying a socioeconomic problem important to

them that existed in Minneapolis. They had three hours to research topics, one hour to compile the data, and present the information to the entire class in fifteen minutes. One research topic centered around the disenfranchised, local Somali community, specifically identifying the drop-out rate of Somali teenage boys leading to gang involvement or returning to Somalia to join Muslim extremist organizations. The second presentation was about bike safety and bike equality between all races and classes in the city. This group identified that cycling lanes on roads and access to bike paths did not extend to poor, inner city communities. The last group presented research regarding access to universal healthcare.

## **MCAD CASE STUDY—DESIGN BLITZ**

In the second class, students were asked to select one research topic from the last class to further investigate and pursue. The class selected the Somali community project. Next, the class was divided into three different groups and each group participated in a creative free-association exercise to identify and dispel cultural stereotypes. After twenty minutes, the groups were asked to present their ideas, and from those presentations, the class selected the most creative solution that would be developed. The most creative solution was the phrase “US+THEM” that was a representation of the existing barriers between MCAD and the Somali community. The students were then tasked to implement the US+THEM campaign and saturate the city in 18 hours. This was termed a ‘design blitz’ which started at 5.00 PM and finished at 7.00 AM the following day. Students created US+THEM flags, banners, posters, and stickers that were placed around the MCAD campus and the Somali community, and stencils that were sprayed in the snow. They also created a video recording that documented the project development and implementation that was posted on You Tube.

It is difficult to ascertain how effective the US + THEM campaign was. It was positively received in and around the MCAD community because it was seen as a call to action for the MCAD community to engage in community participatory projects. The Somali community were excited by the prospect of a predominantly white academic institution reaching out to engage their community. Several Somali community organizations have subsequently contacted both the MCAD design department and institution to create partnerships on different initiatives. The future looks optimistic and it is hoped that this class will become a catalyst for increased institutional involvement with the community.

## **CONCLUSION**

Both classes at MICA and MCAD addressed the needs of both students and faculty. Students were instructed on how to use their skills to understand a community, and the needs and desires of a client and navigate between both in a constructive and creative way. At MICA, many students re-enrolled in the Design Coalition course numerous times with some students deciding to seek employment with studios focused on social issues. Some MICA alum have gone on to be employed in medical publication departments, while others have enrolled in socially-related graduate programs. Many companies have stated that the reason they employed MICA students was, in part, because of the work produced and experience gained in the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course.

The development of the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course and partnership with JHSPH and East Baltimore community has created educational and social benefits. MICA had developed strong links with both JHSPH and the East Baltimore community. More importantly, the East Baltimore community had increased their exposure to the significant research carried out at the JHSPH, positively impacting their lives. The partnership also helped to dispel the many negative myths associated with the Johns Hopkins institution. The JHSPH faculty and staff have provided services and assistance that have proved crucial to the course development. They also helped to create Community Gateways and provided many research projects.

Since the development of the partnership, the Maryland Institute College of Art’s graphic design program was inundated with requests from the East Baltimore community to produce graphic design projects. The MICA/JHU Design Coalition produced design solutions for Type Two Diabetes, Child Injuries Through Gun Violence, Infant Lead Poisoning, Kidney Donation and a Mobile Safety Center (CareS), research projects that have all been implemented.

It is too early to say with any clarity what the impact of the social projects will be at MCAD since there has only been one class offered. What is clear is that the institutional profile has been raised in the local communities and of the twelve students who took the class three have graduated and five are retaking the class next semester. A desire to collaborate between the institution and the local community is gaining momentum.

In conclusion, the benefits outweigh the risks. There is a need for graphic design students to become involved in real projects involving real clients in real communities in order to broaden both students' educational experience and their understanding of client management. The students have expressed that they find out more about themselves as designers and individuals from interacting with the community. Students have also expressed that they have benefited from understanding the needs of the client, time management, and project constraints. These classes inevitably involve a great deal of reflection as the student questions issues about inequality in inner city communities and the effectiveness and limits of design. For the student, the class opens up a wider understanding of the complexity and interconnectivity of the world, and their role as a designer within that complex system.