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Rhode Island a gold mine for study of graphic design

Programs can be found at many area colleges, and a number of well-known designers have established their businesses in the state.

By ELAINE LEMBO
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

Gutenberg could never have imagined it:
A pamphlet about breast cancer.

A brochure on AIDS, the sporting symbol for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

All are visual images, and each, in its own way, represents a breadth of careers in the world of graphic arts and design, from the methodology applied to the message to the technical printing process and paper quality of the final product.

As communication evolves from

Turn to DESIGN, Page D-9

EDUCATION

Long-distance courses gain popularity at Salve Regina. Page D-8

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Design

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the movable type of the 15th century into the computer and information superhighway traffic jams of the 21st, the role of the person who can drive home the messages in a clear yet sophisticated and captivating manner is a critical, and often, lucrative one.

"Observe our world is permeated with graphic images," says Hans van Dijk, head of the graphic design department at the Rhode Island School of Design. "More and more corporations and institutions have come to understand that the visual form of the message - either typography or images or some combination - has to have a good quality. There's so much "stuff" being produced today, in this world, there is a definite need for well-trained designers."

Student appeal

The opportunity to parlay creative talent into solid careers makes graphic fields an attractive pursuit. The actual jobs graduates in graphic arts and design are moving into are quite diverse, yet they share the common goal of effective communication. "In our society, communication is central," says a spokesperson for the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) in New York City. "As we shift from manufacturing to service economies, communication has become much more dominant."

At RISD, the graphic design department opened in 1960. In 1979, the graduate-level program was added, and in 1989, the professional, five-year degree program. The department now has 280 students, with 188 undergraduates, totals that are easily double those of the early 1970s, according to van Dijk.

"It's a viable industry and a creative endeavor which you can make a good living at," van Dijk says. "Students see it as a way to synthesize their interests of a creative lifestyle, where they're dealing with support of art, making things that may not be utilitarian, but a way to live."

Positions range from the conceptual to technical. They include art directors in design studios; interior design positions involving making the information of the computer screen easier to use; the more traditional positions creating graphic design of brochures, catalogs, logos, posters, signs and printed advertisements, and typography design, among others.

"The jobs are diverse and those related to printing and production include desktop publishing, advertising layout of newspapers pre-press and computer engineer, the called technical service representative, someone who examines computer disks to ensure they are error-free before a press run; color scanner, process photographer or press person."

"The jobs require electronic publishing skills," explains Prof. Lenore D. Collins of the industrial technology department at Rhode Island College. A more computerized printing industry has eliminated much of the manual work of earlier decades, says Collins, who is in charge of the graphic communications technology concentration at RIC and who helps graphic design students in the RIC art department understand the roles of production and printing in the graphic process.

"Charting growth according to courses and sections," Collins says, "I've had twice as many sections in the last four years. Classes are always full."

"Look around you," she says. "We cannot survive without printing. Think of yourself waking up and looking around. Tell me all the things you see that are printed - on sheets, walls, clocks, pajamas, cereal packages. Toothpaste boxes. It's everywhere. It's a big part of our life and people don't realize printing is the third-largest industry in the United States."

"Yes, one cannot make the role of the computer in graphic design. "People are in love with the computer and being romanced by it, but ultimately it's not romantic. It's a lot of hard hours and a lot of hard work," says Prof. Sharon E. DeLucca of the graphic design program at Roger Williams University.

"And the computer isn't the mind, the designer is. My students quickly realize they're not going to be wooed by a beautiful thing but a demanding machine. You have to tell it exactly what to do and when... Training about concept is the only way you can train. The mind is the best tool - not the computer. If you don't train students' minds, just train them in computers, you haven't taught them."

Graphic arts in R.I.

Options close to home make this the ideal state for study and work in the field. "Rhode Island is an excellent place to make a living," says spokesperson of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. "You've got RIC, RISD and Brown's graphic department. You've got great people who settled there and a lot is going on."

"Clearly, firms can be as small as free-lancers who work from home to those who work out of departments in manufacturing and industry. The work can be large or small, from offices with 2 to 4 people, to large, large, 50 or 60," says van Dijk. "The largest firms often work for Fortune 500 companies, major industrial or manufacturing firms. Free-lancing gives the option of creating your own lifestyle and work environment. It's attractive."

"It's well-known leaders like Malcolm Greers. Great Designers of Providence, creators of the visual theme for the Atlanta Olympics, scratch the surface of the list. A lesser eagle is Peter Alf Anderson, who runs his business, Launch Pad, from his home in Providence. Richard Sam Worman, who is the founder of the format for Access Guides for nearly every major U.S. city and international cities like London, Paris and Rome, runs an office of five people in Newport. He now runs the annual California TED conference focusing on dealing with the convergence of technology, entertainment and design."

Greer's first designs college textbooks, publications for the Ogilvie-heim and Metropolitan Museum of Art, signage systems and identities for corporations and hospitals, among other clients. "If you're the best person one can be," he says. "I might disagree with other viewpoints, but I think graphic design is a really sophisticated thing. It connects to the art. It's often confused with commercial art."

"Graphic design is more consultation. Graphic design doesn't make tangible products. They're dealing with ideas and should be able to project things into the future. We don't make pictures to hang on a wall like fine artists."

"Dealing more with timeless ideas. We're not dealing with things that move in and out of vogue. We believe design is a language and we think we're communicating with people."

"I think design is going to become more important," says Greer, who maintains a full teaching load at RISD, where he headed the graphic design department in the 1980s. "We're about powerful communication, and communication is lack-
Find a niche

The student contemplating study in graphic arts and design may wish to get a copy of Grear’s Inside/Outside, which has been praised in the field and beyond for its portrayal of the discipline. Or students may consult the 1994 edition of Graphic Design: A Career Guide and Education Directory, edited by Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl and published by the AIGA Press. (Find it at the RISD store and Barnes and Noble.) It answers a lot of questions and helps clear up some confusing terminology: "Graphic arts and graphic design are two different things—period," says the AIGA spokeswoman. "Graphic design grew out of graphic arts, and the AIGA is an organization of 8,000 graphic designers. The two disciplines hold hands but they’re not the same thing.

"The printer is not a designer. Those jobs got sorted out in an industrialized society. Gutenberg did both, but as people got more and more focused on doing one thing well, some people became designers and some became printers."

The book “answers that question specifically,” she says. It breaks graphic design down into manageable chunks. Chapters answer other questions, like: What is graphic design? What does a graphic designer need to know? Who becomes one? What goes on in design school? How do graphic design programs differ? How does one select a design school?

Other chapters tell how to find your first job, give commentary from graphic designers at work and discuss the future of the industry, and there is a directory of every school in the United States which teaches design and related courses, according to answers AIGA received in a survey of design schools.