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## Study of Students' Knowledge of the Profession of Graphic Design

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Study of Students' Knowledge of the Profession of Graphic Design

by

Rachael Caroline Thomas

A Thesis Submitted to the Honors College of The University of Southern Mississippi In Fulfillment of  
the Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Fine Arts in the Department of Art and Design

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## Introduction

Research, or rather the lack thereof, seems to indicate a lack of appreciation for graphic design, designers themselves, and the work they do in both the public and scholarly society. Without proper acknowledgement from the public and academia, graphic design as a profession is in danger of disappearing. The problem may stem from graphic design being a relatively new field if one is to think of it as really taking off with the invention of computers. This lack of understanding may also contribute to the absence of a single definition for graphic design. To address these concerns, this study will examine students' knowledge of graphic design: what it is students *think* graphic design is and their knowledge about the field in order to determine how prevalent these issues really are.

When, precisely, graphic design developed as an industry is a point that has been contended amongst those working and/or teaching in the field. It could be argued that graphic design began in 1440 with the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg. Was that the beginning? Were the sorts of materials printed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century really “graphic design?” Was the beginning perhaps in the 17<sup>th</sup> century when people were able to easily reproduce color images through the process of chromolithography? Or did the beginning come with the invention of the personal computer and the development of programs like Adobe InDesign, Photoshop, and Illustrator? Furthermore, what really counts as graphic design? Is painting graphic design? What about fashion design or automotive design?

Is designing the exterior of a car really “graphic” in nature? These are all questions that contribute to the confusion and lack of knowledge amongst the student body that surround graphic design as an industry.

Designers make the world a more beautiful place in many ways. Everywhere one looks, graphic design is evident. It is all around but often unappreciated. Again, this study will aim to determine whether a serious problem exists in the academic world when it comes to how much students know about graphic design and designers. Without public knowledge or appreciation for the work designers do, the profession will potentially die. If no one appreciates the field and what graphic designers do, then it is likely they will not realize that they *need* the services of a graphic designer. Without this knowledge, people are apt to think that they can perform these tasks themselves. So, the intention of the study is to discover how students view graphic design and why. It will look at the perceptions and knowledge of students within and outside of the art world in an attempt to shed some light on why graphic design is under-appreciated and to highlight what students know about graphic design as an industry.

## Literature Review

How is it that students have come to have the perceptions they do about graphic design? Even though they interact with graphic design every day, most students do not seem to really know what it is a designer *does* on a daily basis. How did this problem arise?

Graphic design has changed over time and has become a much more broadly accepted field. Robert Harland's article, "The Dimensions of Graphic Design and Its Spheres of Influence", discusses how graphic design has come to include more areas of the art world and how it is being used more widely in other non-art disciplines. The following quote really stood out: "In this sense, graphic design has been depicted as a unified thinking and doing activity that involves idea generation, image creation, word interpretation, and media realization, for industry, commerce, culture, and society" (Harland). The article aims to find a better way to both teach and describe graphic design through seeing the field in a whole new light, a view that examines processes and not just products.

This article addresses the question: "What is graphic design?" Harland's contention is that graphic design ought to be a more widely acknowledged field because it encompasses so many facets of life and various industries, even ones that are not necessarily thought of as being related. Thus, this article supports the general hypothesis that graphic design is somewhat under appreciated and not well understood.

Teal Triggs' article, "Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future", focuses on better establishing graphic design history as a means to better define graphic design and as a way to move forward. The article points out that until quite recently graphic design has not been viewed as a cohesive field but rather as separate industries, such as: printing, photography, typography, and

advertising. The author refers to the complete lack of graphic design history among “the stalwarts of academy and within publishing houses” (Triggs). The article then seeks to establish where to begin writing about graphic design history and also states that graphic design should be seen not only as an economic tool, but also as a cultural and social one.

A similar view is expressed by Robert Harland in his article, "The Dimensions of Graphic Design and Its Spheres of Influence". This article points out the need for a more cohesive, accurate, and established recording of graphic design history. The author argues that the absence of a well established history leads to the public's confusion and lack of knowledge about graphic design. The history of a field assuredly contributes to what people think of the field. How can one determine what something is without knowing its history? The almost complete lack of a written graphic design history may hinder the process of better defining graphic design and what it is designers do. And this is likely the very reason why most students have such a vague perception and little knowledge of graphic design.

This article also makes a valid point about researching the history of a topic before considering its present. As the philosopher and writer Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This is true about all history, graphic design history included. If society as a whole does not know the basic history of the industry, then we are doomed to ignore what the history has taught us about design. Without knowledge of the history, there can be no progress in graphic design as an art form and it will most likely be pushed more and more to the wayside. No one should want to live in a world without designers making it a more aesthetically pleasing and communicative place.

Samantha Lawrie's article, “We Have A Lot To Talk About: Dialogue Journals in Graphic

Design Education”, also encourages graphic design students to learn more about the history of graphic design and to make connections between history and their own work. The author addresses the problem of graphic design students' perceptions and understanding of graphic design. This article suggests that students are simply software obsessed and cannot see past that to the artistic principles at work behind the software. The author advocates for better utilization of socializing, language, and teacher support in order for students to better learn. The idea is to better educate graphic design students and give them a much better understanding of graphic design as an artistic discipline.

Lawrie believes that if students had a better understanding of graphic design history, they could make connections between history and their own work. It is important to understand how history's trends affect the current world and how that idea works in art. If students can better understand art and graphic design history, they can identify which trends in graphic design history are affecting their work and their individual styles.

If even graphic design students do not have a solid understanding of graphic design as a broad subject, then how could anyone expect those who are not designers to understand anything about it? The author's opinion seems to be that if taught with more emphasis on reading, writing and conversation, then graphic design students could be more successful in communicating with the public through their work.

Blackwell, Bucciarelli, Earl, and Eckert's article, “Shared Conversations Across Graphic Design”, was written by four different designers who all work in different fields. The article compares the varying processes of designers and highlights “a fragmented picture of design as a whole”. The article shows that even though these designers work in different fields, they are still using similar

artistic processes. Also, the article compares and analyzes the personal experiences of designers rather than describing vague truths or principles that are alien to most people. The goal is to understand the behavior of a designer, regardless of whether they design clothes, automobiles, buildings or movie posters.

This article illustrates how design manifests itself in many different fields, which likewise illustrates how graphic design is incorporated into more facets of life than students typically realize and how it really affects so much of the visual world. After the study was conducted, the researchers noticed a distinct trend. A “recognition by our participants of the commonality in their own experience” was noted by the researchers. The article suggests that designers know how they relate and connect to one another but that the general public does not see the parallels between say a landscape architect and a fashion designer.

Likewise, this article emphasizes that graphic design is everywhere. Nearly all fields are affected in some way by graphic design. If people could see and understand that fact more readily, progress might be made towards a better understanding and appreciation for graphic design as a whole.

Samantha Lawrie's article, “Graphic Design: Can It Be Something More? Report On Research”, focuses on how people's strongest memories come from sensory experiences, especially those involving more than one sense. This being the case, designers should learn to make their audiences really “feel” their work and not just see it. The idea is to experience design through feeling rather than through an explanation of the meaning of the work. A truly emotional response to a piece of work is so much more powerful than just a comment or two. The author seeks to find a way to get her students to push further and achieve design that can be experienced and not just viewed.

Lawrie clearly thinks that graphic design ought to be a much more sensory experience which demonstrates yet another perception, this one from a professional, about graphic design. She believes that if people experience graphic design in a more real, sensory way, that they will better appreciate it. She maintains that when people have a more emotional response to a piece of work, they are more likely to remember it.

Another present issue in the graphic design industry is presented in Ida Engholm's article, entitled "Digital Style History: The Development of Graphic Design on the Internet". Engholm states that web design is not seen as graphic design and is not generally viewed in an artistic way. The author aims to have web design approached with aesthetic theory as opposed to psychological or media theories. In short, she wants web design to be seen as art and not just as a means to advertise. The author argues that with the invention of the World Wide Web, web design boomed and became an integral part of graphic design. The author also argues that people do not put the same sort of thought and care into web design as they do into other areas of graphic design. For example, web developers tend to focus simply on the technical aspects of a website, whereas a graphic designer actually designs the visual elements of the website. The lack of understanding about the differences between these two professions may also be contributing to web design not being seen as art.

The contention is that web design is absolutely an artistic part of graphic design and should be viewed as such. This article highlights how a very specific part of graphic design is falling victim to the general issue at hand: that graphic design is under appreciated and not necessarily viewed as art. The issue brought up about web design booming with the invention of the internet and personal computers is an interesting one. To some extent, that fact may be partially to blame as to why graphic design as a

whole is under appreciated.

Barry M. Katz's review of the book Graphic Design: A New History, by Stephen J. Eskilson, discusses the lack of a cohesive graphic design history. The book itself aims to provide a “new” graphic design history that better describes the trends of graphic design and its effects. The review suggests that graphic design and its history are much more profound than typically viewed. The author of the book, Stephen J. Eskilson, proposes that graphic design was born when “the task of designing printed material was separated from the task of printing it”. When designing became something separate from the actual physical and technical process of printing is when graphic design became a career in and of itself.

Graphic Design: A New History certainly supports Eskilson's argument. The actual process of printing materials is technical and only requires knowledge of whatever printing apparatus one is using. However, the separate task of *making* whatever is being printed is where the design work comes in. Eskilson does an excellent job in highlighting this important difference. His perception of graphic design makes it separate and more artistic than the task of simply printing materials.

The book, What Is Graphic Design?, aims to address the same problem to some extent: what is graphic design? How do we define it and talk about it rather than just do it? How exactly do students view it as an industry? The purpose is obviously to better define graphic design. This book also explains many technical things about designing, such as materials that are used and printing methods. The book aims to make graphic design approachable to all people, not just designers, while arguing that graphic design is everywhere and not just in the “art world” as many students seem to think. Again, better understanding of the subject will lead to more appreciation and general knowledge.

From all of these articles, it seems clear that the general consensus is that graphic design ought to be viewed as art and appreciated a bit more. Many advocate for a better knowledge of history as a means to better understanding graphic design as a profession. With more understanding about what graphic designers do comes more appreciation and hopefully thus will prevent the field from dying out or from making any advances in the future. Further investigation is required to gain an idea about counter arguments and more research about the topic as a whole. Also, surveying needs to be done, which will reveal whether there is or is not a general lack of understanding and knowledge on the subject of graphic design. Hopefully these surveys will show a trend in the student body's opinions and perceptions about graphic design.

## Methodology

### Variables

In the survey conducted, students' knowledge of graphic design was the variable being tested, which makes it the dependent variable in the study. This was measured via the students' responses to the statements in the survey. This being the case, the constant, or independent variable, were the facts about graphic design. Essentially, the independent variable was the answers on the test.

### Sample

The sample group was students over the age of 18 at The University of Southern Mississippi of any race, educational background, income, occupation, gender, and sexual orientation. The only demographic questions that were asked were the students' age, gender, academic major, and job. However, none of these factors were used in a biased manner and none of the above factors were considered when selecting survey participants. Also, participants were not asked for their names. It was hoped that at least over 100 students could be surveyed, however only 58 replies were returned completed.

### Instrumentation

A survey was made consisting of 15 statements that asked participants about various graphics-related topics. The statements were written solely by the conductor of the research (Rachael Thomas). The students indicated whether they strongly agreed, agreed, were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement. The survey was designed to shed light on students' knowledge of graphic design by asking them to respond to statements about tasks that graphic designers perform in the professional world. For example, one of the statements on the survey is, "Graphic designers create

websites”. Depending on how students responded to this, it could be observed whether or not students know that graphic designers do indeed have knowledge about web development and that a large percentage of them do in fact create websites. Two of the statements in the survey, on the surface, appear rather similar. The two statements, “Anyone can do what a graphic designer does” and “I can perform any task a graphic designer can just as well as they can”, were made to determine if each individual student felt as though they *personally* could perform the same tasks as graphic designers and to determine if they felt that others (not necessarily including themselves) could perform the same tasks as graphic designers. Each question was designed in such a way as to determine how much knowledge students have about the field of graphic design and how much appreciation they have for graphic designers. A short answer question was included at the end of the survey to ask, “In your own words, please define the term 'graphic design'”. This question was not used as part of the tallied results, but simply as a way to gather the student body's opinions, in their own words, about graphic design and what they know about the profession.

### Procedures

The procedures were rather straightforward and simple. Surveys were distributed about the campus of The University of Southern Mississippi via residence halls. They were distributed to the following residence halls: Mississippi Hall, Hattiesburg Hall, Hickman Hall, Bolton Hall and Century Park 3. This seemed to be the best way to survey a large number of students quickly and efficiently. This method was intended to make it more convenient for the students to fill out the surveys. Once filled out, the surveys were tallied and grouped in such a way as to compare and contrast people who are involved in the “art world” and people who are not.

## Risk/Potential Obstacles

As far as can be determined, there were not any potential risks involved in taking this survey.

As for obstacles, the only real one was actually surveying a large number of people. Sometimes it is difficult to convince people to take just a few minutes out of their day to fill out a survey. Many people do not want to take the time to do it. This was a rather minor obstacle, but a little speed bump nonetheless. A potential solution was to administer the survey online, thus making data collection much easier and also reducing the time needed from participants. The survey was, in fact, distributed in an online format through Qualtrics.com once it was observed that not many paper surveys were being completed and returned.

## Results / Data Collected

After printing and distributing 577 surveys to four different residence halls (Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Bolton, and Century Park 3), only 27 were completed and returned. This is of course a disappointing return rate. In an attempt to get more feedback, the survey was implemented in an online format through Qualtrics.com. After distributing the survey online, 31 more were returned completed. The following results were taken directly from those surveys.

The academic majors of the students who replied via the paper survey were as follows:

- 7 music
- 2 social work
- 2 accounting
- 2 graphic design
- 1 nursing
- 1 biology
- 1 microbiology / pre-med
- 1 mathematics
- 1 sports management
- 1 business administration
- 1 political science
- 1 criminal justice
- 1 elementary education
- 1 finance

1 english

1 history / english

1 undeclared

1 illegible handwriting

Academic majors were not specified by the students who completed the survey online due to technical difficulties.

Of these students who completed the survey on paper, 12 are in the College of Arts and Letters, 3 are in the College of Health, 1 in the College of Education and Psychology, 5 are in the College of Science and Technology, 4 are in the College of Business, 1 is undeclared, and 1 was illegible. The results of *all* surveys, both on paper and online, indicate the following:

-Statement 1 (Graphic design, branding, and web design are important to a company's success and productivity): 51.7% strongly agree, 44.8% agree, and 3.4% are neutral with no responses recorded for disagree or strongly disagree.

-Statement 2 (Graphic design students take the same classes as fine art majors): 6.9% strongly agree, 22.4% agree, 50% are neutral, 17.2% disagree, and 3.4% strongly disagree.

-Statement 3 (Anyone can do what a graphic designer does): No responses recorded for strongly agree, 5.2% agree, 25.9% are neutral, 37.9% disagree, and 31% strongly disagree.

-Statement 4 (Graphic design is an important part of many fields and careers, not just art-related fields): 49.1% strongly agree, 36.8% agree, 10.5% are neutral, and 3.5% disagree with no responses recorded for strongly disagree. One student did not reply to this question on the

survey, bringing the total respondents for Statement 4 to 57.

-Statement 5 (Graphic designers can work in many professional environments, such as for a newspaper or for a large corporation): 48.3% strongly agree, 41.4% agree, and 10.3% are neutral, with no responses recorded for disagree or strongly disagree.

-Statement 6 (A large company can function and execute marketing campaigns and advertising without the services of a graphic designer): 6.9% strongly agree, 12.1% agree, 34.5% are neutral, 34.5% disagree, and 12.1% strongly disagree.

-Statement 7 (Graphic designers only create logos): 1.7% strongly agree, no responses recorded for agree, 6.9% are neutral, 44.8% disagree, 46.6% strongly disagree.

-Statement 8 (I will one day work within the same company as a graphic designer): 8.8% strongly agree, 28.1% agree, 45.6% are neutral, 7% disagree, 10.5% strongly disagree. One student did not reply to this question on the survey, bringing the total respondents for Statement 8 to 57.

-Statement 9 (Graphic designers do not need to take specialized classes in order to obtain their degrees): 1.7% strongly agree, 3.4% agree, 10.3% are neutral, 39.7% disagree, and 44.8% strongly disagree.

-Statement 10 (I can perform any task a graphic designer can just as well as they can): 1.7% strongly agree, 3.4% agree, 24.1% are neutral, 36.2% disagree, and 34.5% strongly disagree.

-Statement 11 (Graphic designers and illustrators essentially perform the same job): 1.7% strongly agree, 10.3% agree, 32.8% are neutral, 44.8% disagree, and 10.3% strongly disagree.

-Statement 12 (Graphic designers work on a wide variety of projects within a company): 24.1% strongly agree, 55.2% agree, 19% are neutral, 1.7% disagree, and no responses were recorded

for strongly disagree.

-Statement 13 (Graphic designers draw all day): 1.7% strongly agree, 5.2% agree, 32.8% are neutral, 48.3% disagree, and 12.1% strongly disagree.

-Statement 14 (Graphic designers create websites): 12.1% strongly agree, 51.7% agree, 32.8% are neutral, 3.4% disagree, and no responses were recorded for strongly disagree.

Approximately half of the participants answered the final short answer question at the end of the survey. The question states: “In your own words, please define the term 'graphic design' in the space provided to the right. You may use the back of the page if necessary”. Below is a sample of some of the answers:

“Designing nice and better things for other people to look at or buy”

“They design graphics”

“Graphic design is something that allows a person to express themselves through creativity”

“Graphic designer: a form of artist who uses modern technology to display their art and other forms of work”

“Graphic design is the making and styling of any form of graphic. i.e. ad, website, cartoon”

“A creative process”

“Creating illustrations and artwork for business and leisurely purposes”

“The process / craft concerning visual media in relation to established, conceptualized entities (such as businesses, personal affairs, etc.)”

“Awesome”

“Design logos and advertisement slogans that appeal to the consumer”

The results of the data will be analyzed in the following chapter “Conclusion”.

## Conclusion

Based on research conducted, several trends have been observed amongst students' answers to the survey. The first of these trends is that most students (50%) are neutral to the statement: “Graphic design students take the same classes as fine art majors”. This response implies that students are not well aware of the difference between graphic design and fine art. While many consider graphic design to be in the realm of “fine art”, there is a distinct difference. There is certainly a distinct difference in the classes that fine art and graphic design majors take. While graphic design students *do* take many fine art classes as electives, they are not the focus of the curriculum. The most notable difference is the use of computers. Fine art majors, including sculpture, drawing, and painting majors, do not usually need to use computers to produce their work. They certainly do not use the software that graphic design majors use, such as the Adobe Creative Suite. It is entirely possible for someone to major in sculpture and not even own a personal computer. The fact that most students are neutral to this statement suggests that there is a lack of knowledge about how exactly graphic design is defined, and what one has to do in order to major in graphic design.

Perhaps one of the most interesting trends observed is that most students (45.6%) are neutral to the statement: “I will one day work within the same company as a graphic designer”. This is quite revealing of what students think about graphic design and suggests that they are not aware that graphic designers work in a myriad of companies, not just design firms. Any large company that executes marketing campaigns, even if it is just publishing an advertisement in a local newspaper, employs a graphic designer to create the ad itself. Graphic designers work in hospitals, universities, casinos,

museums, etc. Any company that produces a monthly newsletter or ever sends out a letter with a logo on it employs a graphic designer, or *should*. It is usually obvious which companies do and which do not by the quality of the materials they produce. It is interesting that students do not seem to realize that more than likely, they will in fact work within the same company as a graphic designer.

Most students (36.2%) disagree with the statement: “I can perform any task a graphic designer can just as well as they can”. However, 24.1% of students are neutral to the statement. The students who indicated they are neutral to this statement (on paper) are a business administration major (management), an undeclared major, a political science major, a music education major, a graphic design major, a sports management major, a mathematics major, and a criminal justice major. The students who believe they can perform the same tasks as graphic designers just as well (on paper) are a graphic design major, a nursing major, and an accounting major. Excluding the two graphic design majors who replied, none of the students who completed the survey on paper are even in the Department of Art and Design. Why do they think they can perform the same tasks as graphic designers just as well as designers can? Do they just not know what graphic designers do on a daily basis or do they *really* believe they are just as capable and that graphic designers are not needed? Either way, this is not a good trend. If the students believe that they can perform just as well as a graphic designer because they are unaware of what graphic designers do, then there is a lack of knowledge problem. If they think they are just as capable as graphic designers because they think what graphic designers do is easy or unimportant, then that is an ever bigger issue.

Yet another interesting response is that most students (51.7%) agree to the statement: “Graphic designers create websites”. And again, in a close second place, 32.8% are neutral to the statement. This

again implies a lack of knowledge about what graphic designers do on a daily basis. While it is true that not all designers have the coding skills to create a website, those that do not are still perfectly capable of simply designing the website and having someone more skilled with the code actually create the website. It is of course also true that people other than graphic designers can create websites, but the fact that students do not realize that this very practical skill is something most graphic designers can do is troubling. If students are unaware the graphic designers have these skills, then it is likely professionals who are no longer in school also have this perception and would not even think to hire a graphic designer to work with their company's website. This is just another perception that people have that can damage graphic designers' ability to find work. This lack of knowledge about the profession indicates a lack of appreciation as well.

There is a tie for the statement, “A large company can function and execute marketing campaigns and advertising *without* the services of a graphic designer”. 34.5% are neutral and 34.5% disagreed. This split decision between two very different answers seems to indicate that students are unaware of what graphic designers actually do in the professional world. A large portion of graphic designers work for companies other than design firms to do *exactly* what this statement says: execute marketing campaigns and advertising. A good bit of what graphic designers create is designed with the marketing of a certain product, event, or campaign in mind.

Most students (44.8%) indicated that they disagree with the statement: “Graphic designers and illustrators essentially perform the same job”. Again, the second place answer indicates an interesting confusion. 32.8% are neutral to the statement, which seems to indicate a confusion about the difference between an illustrator and a graphic designer. Just as it is true that graphic designers are not the only

people who create websites, it is also true that a lot of graphic designers create their own illustrations for various projects. Someone who is *solely* an illustrator does not necessarily perform the same tasks a graphic designer does.

Most (55.2%) students agree with the statement: “Graphic designers work on a wide variety of projects within a company”. This statement has the highest percentage of students agreeing on one answer and is also only one of three instances when more than 50% of students agreed upon one answer. However, yet again, 19% of students are neutral to the statement. This indicates a lack of knowledge about what graphic designers do at their jobs. It seems that students do not know what kinds of projects graphic designers work on in a company. Most students (48.3%) disagreed with the statement: “Graphic designers draw all day”, yet again, a neutral response is in a close second place with 32.8% of students responding in such a way. To reiterate, this indicates a simple lack of knowledge about what graphic designers *do*. And without knowing what they *do*, how can people know if they need one?

The research, for the most part, supports the hypothesis in that most students have a basic lack of knowledge about what graphic designers do. Most students also do not seem to realize that graphic designers can work for many different types of companies and not just in art-related ones. There also seems to be a general lack of importance and respect placed on the field. This is shown through students' responses to the statement about anyone being able to perform the same tasks as graphic designers just as well. It is certainly troubling to have received some of these results. While students do seem to recognize that graphic designers serve an important function in large companies, it seems as though they do not really know why that is. It is also interesting to note that on none of the statements

did more than 55.2% select the same answer. This indicates a distinct confusion about the statements themselves. The fact that a significant majority could not settle on an answer for a single statement is quite telling about the knowledge base that students have about graphic design as a profession.

Hopefully this is something that can be remedied in one way or another, for the idea of a world with no graphic design is a startling, troubling one. There certainly needs to be more appreciation and respect for the field of graphic design amongst the student population.

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