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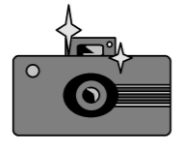


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Why Design Matters for Learning Institutions

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ABSTRACT

Design is becoming a mainstream element in the business world, but it's been late to reach academia. In this brief, I argue that embracing design is critical for institutions and that design affects learning, outcomes, and enrollment.

Keywords: design; design thinking; learning design; user-centered design.

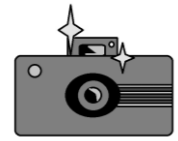
When people think of design companies, they typically think of Apple, Google, or IDEO – big companies that employ leagues of user experience designers in the interest of designing commercial products, digital experiences, or consulting services. However, have you ever considered your school, college, or university to be a design organization? You should – after all, institutions design programs, curricula, courses, and learning experiences. Indeed, design underlies nearly every aspect of education, from environmental design to curriculum design, and increasingly to digital learning design. The experiences institutions and instructors design can make or break learning – and certainly influence student persistence, satisfaction and success.

It's increasingly well known that good design is good for business. Over a year ago, the Harvard Business Review reported that companies that understood the value of design beat the S&P by 228% over a 10-year period. "The bottom line is that companies that use design strategically grow faster and have higher margins than their competitors." The article continued, "this goes beyond traditional consumer products; government and B2B marketing, notorious for not-so-great aesthetics and customer experiences, are starting to make design a priority" (Rae, 2014). We have all witnessed the power of good design; many people credit design with bringing Apple back from the brink. Starbucks's Howard Schultz set out to create the "Starbucks Experience" by designing "third places" for people to enjoy when not at home or work. Recently, IBM announced that it had invested \$100M to expand its

design businesses – opening ten new interactive experience labs around the world (Kolko, 2015; Wilson, 2014). This design revolution has created new career paths, with Fortune.com revealing that graduate degrees in design-oriented disciplines such as human-computer interaction are among the most lucrative of all degrees (Colpan, 2014).

What may be less familiar, however, is how design affects learning – especially in the increasingly online, blended, and digitally augmented environments in which students learn. First, design is essential for both accessibility and Universal Design for Learning. Neither can be achieved in the absence of design. Second, design promotes usability – and usability directly supports learning. Researchers at the University of Patras found that usability factors are significantly associated with students' real and perceived learning performance (Tselios et al., 2001). When learners engage with a highly usable system, they perceive themselves as learning more. And when learners attempt to use a system that lacks usability, they attribute their difficulties to their *own* learning (Mackey, 2008). In addition, Richard Mayer's substantial research on multimedia learning, and John Sweller's research on cognitive load theory, both demonstrate that design is critical to cognition and transfer. Certainly, few would argue that well designed curricula are a central part of any learning experience.

Moreover, with institutions increasingly focused on outcomes, design is even more essential. Outcomes – whether related to student persistence, performance, or employment – require careful, research-based design for



every part of the learning experience. Design that ensures that curriculum meet standards; design that helps support learner persistence from enrollment through completion; design that makes academic and support services, whether brick-and-mortar or virtual, easy to access and use; and design that helps students build connections with their peers and instructors. On and off campus, design is critical to learner achieving learner outcomes.

With the proliferation of online degree programs, learners have more choices over which institutions to attend. Therefore, design will become an increasingly important aspect of their decisions. The design of programs – including their curriculum, their online experience, and their implicit or explicit promised outcomes – will drive decision making and affect the degree to which students continue through a program and the extent to which they refer their friends, colleagues, and contacts into that program. In these cases, design will influence the institutions brand, in big and small ways.

Design also has a less scientific quality that can support, or detract from, students' perception of an institution's culture, brand, and commitment to learning. Design drives innovation, which in turn cultivates an atmosphere of novelty – engaging our brains, capturing our imaginations, and delighting our senses. Design creates excitement – which is why we find ourselves at museums, art exhibitions, and performances – and taps into our fundamental nature as makers. In short, design is a lot like compound interest: it multiplies over time. For these reasons, I think it's important for any good institution to become a design institution, complete with instructors who recognize their roles as designers.

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