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DEAN’S LETTER

Who doesn’t love the monumentality and palpable confidence of universities? We carve our disciplines into our academic temples as though eternal verities: “Drama,” “Chemistry,” “Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free.”

For those who are not denizens of the university, you’re forgiven if you don’t see the constant contests of the heart and mind being waged behind our stately columns. Our university, our disciplines and principles, our educational mission and research ambitions are continuously reshaped by our evolving desires, challenges and conflicts—and by the abiding commitment to cultivating, not coercing, a shared body of beliefs.

Who or what drives that process? Courageous faculty full of conviction and discontent. Headless, headstrong students. Indelicate visiting artists, scholars and researchers speaking their minds. Gadflies to dogma, impatient with anachronism. And maybe it’s just the enduring cedar-fevered weirdness of Austin’s Hill Country itself.

Having fled the looming war in Europe, American dancer Shirlee Dodge was invited in 1943 by Anna Hiss, the head of the Department of Physical Training for Women, to teach the first dance courses at UT in the physical education program—in fact, in the women’s gymnasium that would later be named for Anna Hiss. Dodge graduated from the first higher education dance program in the United States at the University of Wisconsin, a physical education program for women that Hiss hoped to replicate at UT.

The 27-year-old Dodge, however, had a different vision. Young Professor Dodge was convinced that dance should be taught as an art form in the College of Fine Arts alongside music, drama and art. She appealed to the dean of the College of Fine Arts to have her appointment and the dance curriculum split between Physical Education and Fine Arts.

For the time, that was a radical institutional repositioning of women’s bodies and a reforging of academic unorthodoxies. Shirlee Dodge’s transforming conviction—and we have to believe considerable courage at standing up to the imposing figure of Anna Hiss—opened the door of modern dance to women and men at UT. In one of her early program notes for a dance concert at UT, Dodge wrote, “Dance . . . is the tangible medium for expressing those intangible ecstasies and pains common to all mankind . . . regardless of country, color or creed.” Shirlee Dodge was 25 years ahead of her time. Most universities in the U.S. didn’t migrate their dance programs out of physical education until the advent of Title IX in 1972, when women’s physical education transformed into women’s competitive sports.

Seventy-five years later, we’re witnessing another transformation of the UT Dance program driven by the vision of Professor Charles O. Anderson and his colleagues. They are reinventing the program for the 21st century, expanding our understanding of what counts as “concert dance” and reforging whose bodies, movements and cultural traditions might fill the stage and our curriculum. You’ll get to read a great deal more about this and the relaunch of our M.F.A. in Dance in this issue of Arts Next.

The monumental façades disguise a more dynamic and far healthier reality of a university continually reinventing itself for a new day through a constant context of ideas.

Excelsior!

Doug Dempster
Assistant Dean for the School of Design and Creative Technologies
Assistant Dean for Development
Sondra Lomax

ON THE COVER
University of Texas Head of Dance Charles O. Anderson and performed Clapback, created by Anderson and Jeremy Arnold and performed during the Fall for Dance concert in November 2017. Photo by Lawrence Peart

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Senior Associate Dean
Holly Williams
Associate Dean for Undergraduate Studies
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Executive Director and Associate Dean for Development
Sondra Lomax

P.S. You can read more of the fascinating biography of Professor Shirlee Dodge in Dodge Days, written by her daughter and son-in-law, Pamela and Edward McIlhenny.
Two MacArthur Fellows Join Playwriting Program

This fall, the Department of Theatre and Dance will welcome MacArthur fellows Annie Baker and Branden Jacobs-Jenkins to the playwriting faculty. Baker and Jacobs-Jenkins had previously worked together at Hunter College of the City University of New York, where they served as co-associate directors of the Goldberg M.F.A. Playwriting Program and master artists-in-residence.

Baker won the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for her play The Flick, and she was named a 2017 MacArthur fellow. In her work, Baker explores the complexities of human behavior and the ways in which language is often inadequate to build true understanding between people. Her plays include The Antipodes (2017), John (2015), The Alens (2010), Circle Mirror Transformation (2009) and Body Awareness (2008).

Jacobs-Jenkins, who was named a 2016 MacArthur fellow and is a two-time finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, draws from a range of contemporary and historical theatrical genres to engage frankly with the inadequacy to build true understanding between people. His work includes Gloria (2015), Everybody (2009), and Circle Mirror Transformation (2008), among others.

School of Design and Creative Technologies Introduces New Extended Education Program

Directed by Assistant Professor of Practice Julie Schell and Assistant Dean Doreen Lorenzo, the new Extended and Executive Education program in the School of Design and Creative Technologies reaches beyond campus to help companies organize and execute methodologies that will help them spur change and innovation within their organizations.

Its headlining course, “Think Before You Design Think,” leads organizations through the process of discovery, problem solving and the adoption of human-centered design. AT&T, Charles Schwab, Southwest Airlines and UT’s Office of the Vice President for Research are among the initial group of clients to use the program.

Students Create Design for LBJ School’s In the Arena Award

Students from the Department of Design, under the guidance of Assistant Professor Jiwon Park, designed and constructed the physical award for the LBJ School of Public Affairs’ new In The Arena award. The inaugural award was presented to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in November.

Over the course of several months, students in Park’s wrkm design studio class worked to conceptualize this award to recognize those who have dedicated their lives to public service. The students worked with the LBJ School to identify values that represent the meaning of the award, and researched, developed ideas and created prototypes using a variety of materials and processes. “A Burning Torch” by Jenna Ma, Michael Johnston Jr. and Nader Sadoughi was selected as the final design, symbolizing enlightenment, hope and truth, and blazing with perseverance and patience.

Philanthropist Mary Bartholow Honored Posthumously with 2019 Doty Award

Longtime College of Fine Arts supporter and Advisory Council member Mary Bartholow (1925–2018) was honored with the 2019 E. William Doty Award, the highest honor bestowed by the College of Fine Arts. The Doty Award, now in its 23rd year, is named for the founding dean of the College of Fine Arts and recognizes individuals or organizations who have distinguished themselves through extraordinary professional achievement and/or demonstrated a productive dedication to the college.

Bartholow joined the College of Fine Arts in 1958 by the alumni association, Distinguished Alumnus Awards are granted annually to alumni who have distinguished themselves professionally and through service to The University of Texas at Austin. Schenkkan is the author of 16 plays, including All the Way, Building the Wall and The Kentucky Cycle, and a musical, The Twelth. His work has been performed around the world, and his writing has been recognized with the highest honors — he is a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award winner and has been nominated three times for the Emmy Award. His movie and TV credits include Hacksaw Ridge, The Quiet American, The Pacific, The Andromeda Strain, Crazy Horse and Spartacus. The College of Fine Arts honored him with the E. William Doty Distinguished Alumnus Award in 2014.

Entertainment Industry Veteran Patti Burke Joins School of Design and Creative Technologies as Head of Industry Relations

The College of Fine Arts at The University of Texas at Austin has appointed Patti Burke to the newly created position of head of industry relations to support the school’s national brand awareness in search of industry partners and collaborators. Most recently, Burke developed and led a global strategic talent initiative at Walt Disney Imagineering, aimed at professional development of students and professionals.

After spending more than 20 years working in the entertainment industry, Burke comes to UT Austin with decades of professional development and talent strategy experience. She will work closely with Doreen Lorenzo, assistant dean of the School of Design and Creative Technologies, and the school’s faculty to deepen relationships with game firms, content studios and entertainment companies. Additionally, she will work with the College of Fine Arts’ career services team to support the university’s college-to-career initiatives.
Research Team Led by Two SDCT Faculty Members Selected for President’s Award for Global Learning

A research team that includes two faculty members from the School of Design and Creative Technologies has been selected as one of seven recipients for the President’s Award for Global Learning at The University of Texas at Austin.

The team, led by Assistant Professor of Design Jiwon Park and Michael Baker, assistant professor of practice in Arts and Entertainment Technologies, will explore whether culturally grounded intervention programs, through the use of a mobile app and in-person workshops, can have an effect on people’s opinions on mental illness and suicide in South Korea. The team also includes faculty adviser and UT Professor Soyoung Ordonez (Sociology/Government) and Michael Baker, assistant professor of practice in Arts and Entertainment Technologies.

Accolades and Awards

- Professor of Wind Conducting and Director of Bands Jerry Junkin was nominated for a Grammy Award in the Best Classical Compendium category for his CD, John Williams at the Movies.
- Associate Professor of Dance Gesel Mason was awarded a prestigious Rauschenberg Residency to continue work on her archival project, No Boundaries.
- Susan Mickey won a Jeff Award in Costume Design for her work in The Taming of the Shrew (Chicago Shakespeare Theater).
- Assistant Professor of Design Jiwon Park received a Red Dot Award: Communication Design in the Brand Design category for her project, “SAIB.” Park created a brand concept, logo, visual system and application for the intimate cosmetic brand SAIB & Co, which aims to tackle the entrenched cultural taboos around female sexuality in South Korea by rebranding brands.
- Linda Henderson, the David Bruton, Jr. Centennial Professor in Art History, received a Leonardo Pioneer Award for her “inspiring work at the intersection of the arts, sciences and technology.”
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- Associate Professor of Composition Yevgeniy Shariat is one of five composers whose work is featured on the Aizuri Musicians of Cuba.}

What attracted you to the Visual Arts Center?

A number of things were attractive about the VAC—that it’s part of such a phenomenal research university and embedded within a college of fine arts, its reputation, and that it’s located in Austin. I’ve always loved visiting Austin, and it felt like such a gift to be able to move here and become a part of the art community in this city.

Being connected to Studio Art, Art Education and Art History is really special and offers an incredible opportunity to collaborate with students, faculty and staff. I want faculty and students to benefit from our exhibitions and to use the VAC as a teaching space that can illuminate the ideas forward in their courses.

I was also really impressed with the VAC’s artist-in-residence program, which gives emerging artists the opportunity to realize a new and site-responsive work in our largest gallery, which is HUGE, with 27-foot ceilings. The artists are in Austin for two to four weeks, and during that time they make new work, give a lecture and meet with students. It’s quite an opportunity for students to see an artist’s process firsthand (it’s like a little peek into an artist’s studio) and for the VAC to have the opportunity to premiere new work in our galleries. I really see it as mutually beneficial for students and the visiting artist.

What is the VAC’s current role, and how do you see that evolving in the future?

We wear many hats. We are a space for the campus community to engage with contemporary art—to think critically about art and visual culture, to hone students’ visual literacy skills and also to have conversations and dialogues around important topics that are being addressed in the work of many contemporary artists: the role of art in society, the role of the artist in a democracy, how art can challenge our notions of who we are, how we relate to one another, our shared histories and so forth. I think we’ve done an amazing job connecting with UT students, faculty and staff, but I want to expand our audiences to include the communities of greater Austin. College campuses can be difficult spaces to penetrate. Where do you park? How do you navigate the campus? I want the VAC to be a place that feels accessible and welcoming to all, so increasing our visibility in greater Austin is a top priority.

As a university gallery, you have multiple audiences: students, staff and faculty members, the local community and a broader art-seeking public. How do you engage these different groups?

We engage these groups in myriad ways: We have an array of programming, including exhibitions, artist lectures, panels, conversations between artists, performances and discussions led by curators, artists and the VAC fellows, who are graduate students from Art History, Art Education and Studio Art. And, I think the artists we are showing are expressing ideas that resonate with many people, such as: how we represent ourselves and construct notions of self, how we engage with the world around us and consider our impact on the Earth, how we understand history and culture, what makes us who we are.

Contemporary art is often, in my opinion, misconstrued as exclusive and difficult, but I think oftentimes it just takes a little more time to unpack. And, the very act of prolonged and critical looking, of spending time with something, is an important skill, and one that is worth cultivating. I would love it if someone came to the VAC skeptical of contemporary art and left a convert.

MacKenzie Stevens

MacKenzie Stevens was appointed director of the Visual Arts Center (VAC) in October 2018. As director of an experiential, public-facing curatorial laboratory, Stevens is responsible for providing vision and programmatic leadership in her new role. She joins the VAC from the Hammer Museum at the University of California in Los Angeles, where she was part of the curatorial team for four years.

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“Dance is for everybody. I believe that the dance came from the people and that it should always be delivered back to the people.” -Alvin Ailey

Charles Anderson’s voice cracked as he spoke. It was November 2018, and he was addressing a large group of students who had just auditioned for his piece, *Idobalé*. Named after the Yoruba word meaning to pay one’s respect, *Idobalé* would be performed at the Dance Repertory Theatre’s spring concert as the Haruka Weiser Memorial Commission, created in 2017 and named after a first-year dance student who was murdered on campus in 2016 while walking home from rehearsal. Her death had wounded their community deeply; Anderson was reminding them that the piece was also a tribute to their strength. Anderson says the students approached dance differently after Weiser’s death, pushing themselves beyond technique and using dance as an outlet to organize and work through the chaos they were feeling.

“I have had many moments of darkness in my life,” says Anderson. “Dance puts you in your body, and sometimes that’s all you need to come out of your head.”

Anderson’s philosophy of dance is rooted in the idea that movement is a language that can convey lived experiences. As head of UT’s Dance program and a professor of dance and African diaspora studies, Anderson has infused the curriculum, faculty and student body while also maintaining an active professional career.

As a dancer, he has worked with such noted choreographers as Ronald K. Brown, Talley Beatty and Joy Kellman, among others. His choreography has been presented throughout the U.S. as well as internationally. He was selected as one of “The 25 Artists to Watch” by Dance Magazine and is a recipient of a Pew Fellowship in the Arts. His professional work has been supported by such foundations and organizations as the National Performance Network, The Pew Foundation for Arts and Heritage, The Independence Foundation, The Puffin Foundation and The Philadelphia Cultural Fund. His latest work, *(R)current Unrest*, was recently awarded a New England Foundation for the Arts National Dance Production Grant and will begin touring in fall 2019.

It’s logical to assume he started dancing at a very young age, but Anderson didn’t take a formal class until he was a freshman studying engineering at Cornell University, where, after a night out dancing, his friends encouraged him to join a student dance club. “I was hooked after that,” says Anderson, recalling how he felt after choreographing his first solo. “It was a way to express myself without words that felt so honest.”

His time in the club convinced him that he needed to switch majors during his junior year and join Cornell’s dance program, where he was the only male and African-American studying dance. His professors, recognizing both his talent and risk of feeling isolated, brought him into the fold and immersed him into the program.

“(Cornell) had happened to hire two new gay, male faculty, and I had also come out at that time, so they really took me under their wing and immediately started setting work on me,” says Anderson.

He attended numerous competitions and festivals, including the American College Dance Festival Association, where he took a master class taught by the famous choreographer Ulysses Dove. The class would prove to be a turning point for Anderson, although he wouldn’t realize it until years later, when he discovered in a dance history class that the movement Dove had taught him was originally choreographed for Alvin Ailey’s *Vespers*, a commentary on the African-American church. Anderson grew up in the Baptist Church and had been exposed to spiritual forms of dancing and testifying at an early age. It was his aha moment and helped solidify his commitment to what he calls “kinetic storytelling.”

“That solo he had me learn was literally speaking to me again. I thought, ‘Oh my God, this makes sense.’”

After graduation and a brief stint as an assistant principal in East Harlem, Anderson moved to Philadelphia and started his own dance company, dance theatre X (dtX) in 2003. When he applied for an adjunct teaching position at Temple University, he was recruited to join the university’s M.F.A. program. There, he discovered not only the field for African diaspora studies, but the language to speak about techniques and traditions that had been silenced or dismissed by imperialism, colonialism and racism.

“So much of the field of Africana studies, especially to Euro-centrists, can feel specious, like, ‘That’s great, but where is the actual proof?’ Just learning how to speak about it was life-changing and set me on a path, choreographically,” says Anderson.

Anderson would receive his graduate degree with honors and go on to create the first African-American studies program for Muhlenberg College, a small private liberal arts school in Pennsylvania, where he worked for several years before accepting an associate professor position in UT’s Dance program.

“Dance puts you in your body, and sometimes that’s all you need to come out of your head.”

Anderson and students during auditions for his piece, *Idobalé*, created for the Haruka Weiser Memorial Commission. Photo by Jen Reel.
created in 1945, still 11 years before african-americans would be accepted into the university of texas, ut’s dance program was built on western classical concepts of dance. since then, it has taken generations of faculty and leadership to incorporate not just modern theories and contemporary work, but space for non-white traditions and forms to be considered.

then-head of dance lyn wiltshire created anderson’s position in 2011 to bring theory and practice of black dance to the department. an associate professor who came to ut in 1995, wiltshire had written the curriculum for the first dance m.f.a. and education programs in the early 2000s as well as the first global education and study abroad programs. she worked with professor of african and african diaspora studies gem dawn jones, dean doug dempster and the office for inclusion and equity to bring someone with anderson’s expertise to the department.

anderson accepted and began teaching aesthetics in african-american concert dance, kinetic storytelling and african-american dance history first as elective courses. he’s initiated nationwide recruiting tours with the college’s performing arts high schools, attracting a large pool of talented and diverse students, both in gender and race, to the comprehensive program anderson and other faculty members are building.

anderson was appointed head of dance in 2015 and successfully lobbied to reinstate the m.f.a. program, which had been put on a brief hiatus. he also garnered support for a stronger guest-artist program, inviting artists such as gesel mason, a renowned choreographer and dancer whose current projects include performing and documenting a living archive of work by prominent african-american choreographers; and rennie harris, whose pioneering work in hip-hop and street theater has dubbed him the “basquiat of the u.s. contemporary dance scene” by the london times. anderson successfully recruited both as faculty members, bringing hip-hop, african-american history and tap into the core curriculum. to help build and expand upon the program’s legacy, anderson offered full-time positions to adjunct faculty members brought in under wiltshire’s leadership. dorothy o’shea overbey, a classical and contemporary ballet instructor with expertise in dance in film; and erica gionfriddo, who brings a deep integration of media and dance to the program.

“I’ve seen an enormous escalation in things that were already here, but now they are fanned to a large flame,” says associate professor of practice andrea beckham, currently the department’s longest-serving dance faculty member. “charles is a warrior for artist citizenship and social justice, and he pushes for interdisciplinary and collaborative and multidisciplinary work. i think it’s a really beautiful direction we’re heading.”

anderson’s vision of dance as a platform for social commentary, for reflecting and challenging our cultural and societal norms, has expanded the program’s space for students to realize what kind of artists they can be.

“He’s brought in a really open, reflective thought process to artist citizenship and what that really means,” says beckham. “dance can live in so many ways. the changes he’s made inspire the students in a way that inspires their professors.”

“i’m just trying to set up a system that will perpetuate itself,” says anderson. “my hope is that we continue to have a diverse understanding of what excellence is. we can have a remarkable b-boy or b-girl at the same time we have a remarkable ballet technician, all under the same roof, with the same level of appreciation and respect for the form and the field.”

“I think we can become one of the top-tier dance programs in this country — top-tier without having to change the character of what we’ve built, which is a program invested in the idea of social justice, artist citizenship and non-elitism.”

“this kind of [social justice] emphasis actually makes you more employable,” says mason, who serves as one of heckler’s m.f.a. mentors. “often i tell students that by being able to see where dance works in a community, you can make that job for yourself. you write that grant, you imagine new things that other people haven’t done or seen yet. this m.f.a. is really designed to hone an artist’s voice.”

“i knew bringing hip-hop here when there hasn’t been a culture of it would be jarring to the student population,” says anderson. “i could see that her being white could probably help with that transition, but more importantly, she connected so well with the students. her overall gift is that she can teach so brilliantly and has tremendous integrity.”

heckler accepted and would go on to teach the first hip-hop class offered in the dance program. within the year, anderson invited her to join his newly revised m.f.a. program, based in social justice and artist citizenry.
Together
Now

Four College of Fine Arts Courses That Use Collaborative Learning

By Jen Reel
Illustration by Moira Scrimgeour

When two or more people work together toward a common goal, great things can happen.

Studies show that collaborating with others can improve our well-being in a number of ways: It can foster deeper communication and refine our social skills, develop our critical thinking and self-identity and engage our creativity and imagination. When used as a learning tool, working collaboratively can also lead to greater cognition and long-term retention of information.

Here in the College of Fine Arts, our faculty uses collaborative learning methods in their classrooms to challenge, elevate and inspire. When students work together, not only can they gain a deeper understanding of their disciplines, they can also learn how to be more thoughtful, focused and confident. We believe these skills will advance them not only in their careers, but throughout their lives.

With hundreds of courses offered in our college, choosing just a handful was tough. But we’ve selected four classes, one from each department, that we think exemplify creative, collaborative learning.

Branding Spaces
School of Design and Creative Technologies

Although this spring marks the inaugural offering of Assistant Professor of Practice James Walker’s upper-level elective course in Design, its popularity was felt before class even started; The waitlist could have filled another class. Maybe students’ work each semester and build upon it.

At the end of the semester, groups are tasked with identifying critical materials for class review and leading class discussion based on those materials. Reynolds says the groups have shown a lot of creativity and enthusiasm when leading discussions—one group even developed their own video in the spirit of Jonas, assigning everyone parts, complete with props, and using it as a way to better understand her work. Reynolds hopes the intense focus on one artist will help students to not only think about an artist’s evolution as something to learn, but also as a tool for thinking about their own work, too.

Music and Culture
Butler School of Music

Not only does this class involve a heavy amount of student group work, it’s run by a teaching team as well. Created by Associate Professor Sonia Seeman and customized and carried out by multiple instructors each semester, this course debuted in spring 2017 and is required of all first-year Butler School of Music students. Its main objective is to give students the tools to understand and shape their roles in society, and although there is an extensive amount of peer-evaluated writing in this course, the biggest collaboration comes from their group discussions. The depths students are willing to go do not disappoint.

They talk about everything from politics and identity to copyright, colonialism, creativity and privilege. They question how institutions determine curriculum and discuss the importance of giving back to their communities. They ponder professional ethics and personal, creative meaning. They ruminate on questions from “How can we do the most good in the world?” to “Why does music matter?”

The class offers a deep and collective inward look into the moral and motivated psyche of not just individual artists, but professions in music as a whole. What better foundation for first-year students than one that teaches them how to turn a critical eye to their own motivations and goals?

Performing Art History: Joan Jonas
Department of Art and Art History

Taught by Associate Professor Ann Reynolds, this Art History class examines the evolving practice of performance artist and video pioneer Joan Jonas, whose work offers a critical lens to the rise and historical relevance of minimalism, video and performance in the U.S. and Europe in the 1960s and most recent decade.

The class reviews and evaluates one performance piece each week, reading existing critiques and creating their own peer-evaluated assessments. Reynolds says the focused group discussions bring more voices and ideas to the table, resulting in more thoughtful and engaging dialogue and helping them move past the fear of sharing their thoughts and findings with each other.

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Butler School of Music

Not only does this class involve a heavy amount of student group work, it’s run by a teaching team as well. Created by Associate Professor Sonia Seeman and customized and carried out by multiple instructors each semester, this course debuted in spring 2017 and is required of all first-year Butler School of Music students. Its main objective is to give students the tools to understand and shape their roles in society, and although there is an extensive amount of peer-evaluated writing in this course, the biggest collaboration comes from their group discussions. The depths students are willing to go do not disappoint.

They talk about everything from politics and identity to copyright, colonialism, creativity and privilege. They question how institutions determine curriculum and discuss the importance of giving back to their communities. They ponder professional ethics and personal, creative meaning. They ruminate on questions from “How can we do the most good in the world?” to “Why does music matter?”

The class offers a deep and collective inward look into the moral and motivated psyche of not just individual artists, but professions in music as a whole. What better foundation for first-year students than one that teaches them how to turn a critical eye to their own motivations and goals?

Production Design Studio: Realizing a Visual Concept from Script to Screen
Department of Theatre and Dance

Do you know what goes into creating a set for a television show? Students in Instructor Yvonne Boudreaux’s class can tell you after spending an entire semester researching a script and working together to build a set from scratch.

Students are placed in groups to cover all the positions in set production, from decorators to builders and prop managers, and everything in between. They break down a script and research the scenes, then set about fabricating every single item to fill their set, just like in real life, where the option to use name-brand items can be tricky and varies from show to show.

Although Boudreaux opens the course to both undergraduate and graduate students from all disciplines, her class has attracted mainly Theatre and Dance, Architecture and Radio-Television-Film (RTF) students, and their diverse skills have proven critical to the learning process. Theatre and Dance students help explain Vectorworks software, Architecture students bring their knowledge of building, and RTF students demystify the language of film. They share knowledge, take creative risks and come together in the final moments to build and dress their sets. And the best part? Boudreaux has them take photos and organize their collective work into their own presentations that can be used in their portfolios.
Design Ideas Take Flight Off Campus

College of Fine Arts collaborates with outside companies to create new classes supporting hands-on, experiential learning for students

By Alicia Dietrich

It’s Tuesday evening in the IBM Design Studios in North Austin, and 24 UT students from the School of Design and Creative Technologies are clustered in teams around the room with their IBM instructors. The IBM designers guide the discussion, but the students are responsible for brainstorming ideas and thinking through next steps. There’s no final exam in this class. There are no “right” answers.

“This class is really teaching me that I need to think of all possible options and dive deeper into the mess and be OK with ambiguity, which was something that was really difficult for me,” said Audrey McNay, a senior in advertising who is enrolled in Advanced Design Thinking @ IBM.

The IBM class is just one of many classes now offered by the College of Fine Arts’ Center for Integrated Design that are taught through collaborations with outside companies. The college has been collaborating with outside companies to design hands-on classes for students to tackle real-world projects, often on site at the company’s off-campus location.

Doreen Lorenzo, assistant dean for the School of Design and Creative Technologies and founding director of the Center for Integrated Design, said the ideas for these classes came from talking to colleagues in businesses, non-profits and government and learning more about what they need and observing gaps in students’ educational experiences.

“When students are in traditional classrooms, we provide a wonderful, safe environment for their big, creative ideas,” said Lorenzo. “And we want them to have that experience, but there comes a point where they’re going to take this knowledge that they’re learning, and they have to begin to apply it in situations that are real. What I found is that many didn’t have those real-life situations, and I wanted to figure out a way to make it more real for them.”

The student teams at IBM are focused on applying a human-centered design process to find solutions to real problems that IBM is working to solve in their company—such as designing a blockchain system or revamping the IBM training site. The students in the class were selected through a competitive application process and hail from many departments at UT.

“When I applied for this course and I got in, I expected it to be a type of project where IBM would have solved the problem a year or two ago, and they just want another student group to tackle it and maybe solve it a different way. And that has not been it at all,” said Harper Yatvin, a senior in corporate communications. “Instead, it is, ‘Here’s a problem that we need younger minds to solve.’ I really like that because it’s basically like I’m interning for IBM. I cannot get any more hands-on and closer to what they are doing than right here, right now.”

After the success of partnering with IBM for the first offsite class in fall 2017, the college continued building new collaborations with insurance and financial services company USAA, business consulting firm McKinsey & Co., argodesign studio, artificial intelligence design studio Hypergiant, railroad company BNSF and local design studio Drawn. The Department of Arts and Entertainment Technologies also partnered with lighting company High End Systems to co-teach a class on concert and event lighting, in which students did their final project in the lighting lab at High End Systems.

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“As far as I know, this doesn’t exist anywhere,” said Lorenzo. “And I was told this by most of the businesses I went to. They had never seen anything like that. Businesses obviously have internships, and businesses have been sponsoring classes, but those are on campus. But to actually have classes taught in a business’s location—nobody could tell me this has been done before.”

From top, clockwise

Students in the Making Real World Design @ argodesign present their prototypes of gardening products after five weeks of work in the class, which was held at argodesign’s studios in South Austin. Photo by Alicia Dietrich

Students present their spring 2018 concert and event lighting final projects at High End Systems in North Austin. Photo by Joe Beal

IBM provided shuttle buses every week to transport students from campus to IBM’s offices for the Advanced Design Thinking @ IBM class. Photo by Lawrence Peart
The programs are win-win for students and the companies. Students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in an unfamiliar environment and solve complex problems, and companies have the chance to give back and maybe find their future star hires.

“We want to be responsible contributors to the community, and we feel like this is a wonderful way to do it,” said Kevin McDonald, lead instructor for the course Making Real-World Design taught at argodesign’s studios in South Austin. “Will it yield potential employees? Perhaps. But I’m less about that than more about making sure that we’re paying it forward and making sure that the opportunities and chances that we had been given earlier in our careers, that we provide the same thing for younger students.”

When Theatre and Dance senior Grayson Rosato entered his junior year, he felt sure he was going to work in arts management someday. But a whole new world of options opened up for him after taking several courses offered by the Center for Integrated Design.

He intuitively understood many of the concepts they were using in his Integrated Design classes because he’d been using these same skills for years in his theatre experiences: He’d practiced empathy by exploring a character’s motivation in shows he had acted in, he understood how to connect with audiences, he’d pitched shows to Cohen New Works Festival, and he understood storytelling and narrative arc from breaking down plays they were reading in his classes. But Rosato had never thought about how those skills were applicable outside of the world of theatre.

“Rosato has taken two classes that were created as partnerships with USAA and Hypergiant, and both courses dealt with designing for machine learning and artificial intelligence. Rosato said that the classes were challenging because he and his team had to work on tight turnarounds, and they had to learn to take constructive feedback on prototypes and quickly turn it into action to iterate on the next version of their idea.

As he headed into his final semester at UT, Rosato accepted a spring internship with Hypergiant that could lead to a full-time job after graduation, and he credits the courses he’s taking in Integrated Design with giving him the hands-on experience and portfolio projects to make this possible.

“The experience we got with USAA was on an elevated level of what you would get in an internship,” said Rosato. “I feel like we were treated as employees of USAA with a guiding hand. It was a challenge, but it was the best challenge because you don’t get that experience when you’re not a student. You can’t ask somebody to do that for you when you get a job.”

A list of faculty books published during the 2018-19 academic year

Dr. Cristóbal Bianchi Geisse
Adjunct Lecturer, Department of Theatre and Dance
Proyecto H
Ediciones del Pez Espiral, August 2018

James Buhler
Professor of Music Theory, Butler School of Music
Theories of the Soundtrack
Oxford University Press, November 2018

Katie Dawson
Assistant Professor of Drama and Theatre for Youth and Communities
Department of Theatre and Dance
Drama-Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning Across the Curriculum
Intellect/University of Chicago Press, Spring 2018

Marianne Gedigian
Professor of Flute, Butler School of Music
Survival of the Flutist
Flutistry Boston Press, August 2018

Mark Goodman
Professor Emeritus, Department of Art and Art History
Death Mask
self-published, October 2018

Joan A. Holladay
Professor, Department of Art and Art History
Genealogy and the Politics of Representation in the High and Late Middle Ages
Cambridge University Press, Europe, February 2019; U.S., March/April 2019

Robert S. Hatten
Marlene & Morton Meyerson Professor in Music, Butler School of Music
A Theory of Virtual Agency for Western Art Music
Indiana University Press, 2018

Darlene C. Wiley
Professor of Voice, Butler School of Music
Singing: The Timeless Muse
Inside View Press, December 2018
Graduate students Chantal Freeman (M.M., second year) and Taiwon Kim (D.M.A., first year) are coached by Assistant Professor Tamara Sanikidze in her office in the Butler School of Music. In January, Sanikidze stepped into her new role as director of the Butler Opera Center.

Photo by Nathan Russell
Zero-Waste Design: The Masks of Act III

Aaron Kubacak
(M.F.A., Costume Design, 2019)

Roxanne Rohmann
(B.A., Theatre and Dance, 2015)

When Aaron Kubacak was asked to design costumes for the student-run production of Mr. Burns: A Post-Electric Play, he was given one stipulation: All the materials would need to meet the producers’ zero-waste goals by being sourced from recycled or sustainable means.

Because the production was supported by a $50,000 grant from UT’s Office of Sustainability, Kubacak was able to hire a team, including alumna Roxanne Rohmann, who created these masks out of everyday trash.

Kubacak sketched his ideas and Rohmann brought them to life, gathering plastic bottles, takeout containers, egg cartons and other items—even an old leather couch—to build these post-apocalyptic Simpsons characters for Act III.

View a gallery of masks and learn more about the play at bit.ly/UTmasks