What Really Matters in Design School: Ten Big Ideas for the Entering Class

by Steven Faerm

Dear Students,

Welcome to Design School! Your childhood dream of studying fashion design in New York City has finally arrived. The world is before you—or more accurately, a fresh new sketchbook to create your world-renowned collections.

As a professor at Parsons for 18 years, I've taught hundreds of design students. When we work together, I often think about their experiences at Parsons, and this prompts reflections on my *own* as a design student. Some of my favorite memories are the weekly all-nighters to finish Maria Laveris' draping homework; finally seeing high fashion in person ("Wow, is that *really* Gigli?"); design room internships that taught me silk georgette from silk charmeuse; and lifelong friendships.

But design school—and the design industry—is vastly different today than in 1994. Our current industry is undergoing seismic changes, and design education is responding. Despite these changes, there *are* things you can do for a grounded, successful college experience. There's a great deal at stake here, and how you navigate these four-years can greatly affect your professional and personal futures. Preparing for your future starts *now*.

Here are 10 big ideas to make the most of your design school experience—and design room future.

1. **You Own Your Education.** College is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so make it count. These four years will whizz by, yet they will have a big impact on your future. The high stakes require you to be *extremely* assertive in learning, exploring, and discovering who you are and what you truly want to be in life. Not getting all that you need from your teacher, your program, or the college? Speak up. Own it.

2. **Take the Most Challenging Teachers Possible.** Learning can be scary, particularly when you've set your dreams on becoming a designer and believe failure is not an option. Yet, big leaps in your creative growth will only occur if you're pushed outside your comfort zones. This will be extremely uncomfortable at first but you'll gain new knowledge for future situations and successes.

Good teachers understand this. They'll push you out of your comfort zones and dig into your work with an extremely sharp, constructive, and critical eye. Over time, you'll learn to apply their high bar to your work and become the very best you can be. I often tell my students that being a professor is a bit like being a personal trainer: You may resent me as I push you every class, but that's why you're here. To have me push you so you can become a *better* designer, think *more* deeply, and ultimately achieve [your dream here]. Over time, you'll notice your improvements and understand what it was all about.

3. **Grades?* Stop Obsessing.** Grades are important when applying to design *school*. You've been accepted and soon you'll be applying to design *companies*. And guess what? Those interviewers won't care one iota if you received an "A" or a "B-" in Mr. Jones' design class! They'll care about your portfolio, your personality, your internships, your skills, and your recommendations.

   What *should* you obsess over? Effort. Give 100% of your effort to all that you do. Effort is perhaps *the* most important trait in college, and in life. It's one of the few things you have complete control over and when you work hard, the rest will come. That said, work should not feel like work so ask yourself, "What do I love doing in my spare time? When do I give 100% of my effort and feel my happiest and most fulfilled?" That's your true [career] calling.

   *In subjective fields like art and design, what constitutes an "A" anyway? One teacher's "B" may be another's "C" so take that grade with a heavy dose of salt.

4. **Your Peers Are Your Network**. You will likely get hired based on someone you know. Start networking with your peers immediately. One of them may be the next Marc Jacobs. You also need a network to call on when *you* are hiring and want stellar recommendations, and to connect job-hunting friends with your hiring contacts. Network with everyone around you—not just in your program but across the entire school because you never know when you'll need a photographer, a graphic designer, an interior designer, or a business partner.

5. **Create a Stellar Reputation**. This industry is a *small* place, so the likelihood you'll run into your former classmates is high. Therefore, it's critical you create and sustain a good reputation. This begins the moment you enter the school's doors and builds over the next four years. It will then stay with you—good or not-so-good—in the years following graduation.

   This exemplified itself when I was a program director for Parsons. I received a resume from a prospective teacher who graduated with my colleague several years back, and she was able to tell me all about this candidate. Was she professional? Did she come to class on time? Was she friendly to her classmates? Did she meet deadlines? Having her insights greatly aided the interviewing processes—all because the candidate had an excellent reputation during design school. Your reputation precedes you.

6. **Make Bergdorf's Your Museum**. New York City is fashion ground-zero and this creates remarkable learning opportunities for fashion students. Every month, visit leading stores as an external course to look at the very best fashion. Touch the fabrics. Look closely at garment construction. Note how collections are merchandized for specific clienteles. See who's shopping. Consider why certain items are on the sale racks. Bergdorf Goodman, Barney's, Dover Street Market, Saks Fifth Avenue, and designers' boutiques are excellent starting points.

7. **Screen *Room 237*.** While your high school art courses emphasized technical skills, your design school courses will prioritize conceptual thinking. This may cause you to scratch your head, wonder how to begin a concept, or even ask "What exactly *is* a concept…and how do I apply it to design?"

   Here's where to begin. Screen Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980), based on Stephen King's best-selling book. Then watch the documentary *Room 237* (2012) to hear film experts analyze and speculate on what Kubrick's film is *really* about. It will blow your mind. Their theories range from the Holocaust to the Apollo 11 moon landing, and learning how Kubrick possibly manifested these into his film direction are jaw-dropping. These films are must-sees if you want to learn about design thinking and how to apply it to your own design processes.

8. **Learn How to Tell a Good Story.** Fashion isn't about need, it's about want, particularly in our overabundant and oversaturated marketplace. Designers ignite this want by creating stories that strategically target their consumers' emotions. Design, then, isn't simply about the object itself but how it makes us *feel* inside.

   To tell a good story that delivers emotional value through design, study the research methods commonly used in the social sciences. These methods will allow you to better understand your consumers' unique psychographic profiles and the changing zeitgeist. What types of narratives will my customer find appealing one year from now? How will her emotional needs evolve? In which direction will global events drive these emotions? How can design embody these stories and emotions?

9. **Fashion + _____.** Advances in thought and innovation occur when a designer has a wide variety of backgrounds. These broadened resources and processes can synthesize to create pure magic. Take Speedo's LZR bodysuit that was designed using advanced computer software provided by NASA. Within a week of its launch, three world records were broken by swimmers wearing the suit.

   To drive fashion forward and spawn the new you'll need to mix it with another "ingredient." Find ways to break down the traditional boundaries of fashion, incorporate different disciplines and areas of expertise into your design methods, and make connections between them.

10. **How to "Wow" That Interviewer.** You sent in your resume and have just been invited to interview for that dream internship. Bravo! Aside from polishing-up your portfolio, there are some additional things you must do to stand out and make a good impression.

    - Always bring your sketchbook. This is what interviewers *really* want to see. Fill your book with a mix of raw ideas and finished sketches, diverse design processes, hand-written notes, technical drawings, and lots of research. Art direct every page so they appear frame-able. Show you can expand one design idea into many versions. Create edit pages. Your interviewer will want to see 2D design processes as figures, flats, and detailed close-ups, alongside 3D design processes. Sketchbooks should flaunt your unique personality while showcasing all your skills.

    - Thoroughly research the company. Review recent press so you are aware of the company's past, present, and future plans. This will arm you with impressive discussion points during the interview, thereby conveying your professional attitude and strong interest in the position. Visit the stores so that, if asked by the interviewer, you can share

what you feel is successful about the collection and how to strengthened the brand moving forward. How can you contribute to their team? What do you offer that no other candidate can? How can you stand out in a sea of applicants?

- Sketch into *their* brand identity. Immediately following your store visit, fill a few sketchbook pages with design ideas for *them*. This certainly doesn't need to be a grandiose project, but rather a few pages in your sketchbook that show you understand their brand and how you would approach it. This not only shows your talent and versatility, but also your ability to take *initiative*—a highly desirable trait for any interviewer! Success is about more than your work. It's about your amiable personality, drive, and ability to take initiative whenever possible. This is also true in your classroom.

Some of these ideas can be done in a day (*Room 237*), others may take years to finesse. No matter what your approach or timeline, these tools and ideas are a great way to kick start your design school experience and fashion design career.

About the author

Steven Faerm is an Associate Professor at Parsons School of Design and a graduate of Harvard University (M.Ed.) and Parsons (B.F.A., Fashion Design). He began teaching in 1998 while designing for Marc Jacobs, Donna Karan, Kenneth Richard, and more. He was awarded The New School's University Teaching Excellence Award and the B.F.A. Fashion Design Program's Teaching Excellence Award, has authored two books about fashion design, and lectures about design education, student development, and pedagogy around the world in locations such as MIT, Brown University, VCU, Shanghai, South Africa, Japan, and more.