

Dissident Professional Practice: How Critical Design Work Can Create Activist Architects While Supporting a More Equitable Profession

TADD HEIDGERKEN

University of Detroit Mercy

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Using a case study of a required professional practice course at the University of Detroit Mercy with a survey of recent graduates from the program, this paper shows how students can be given the skills to incorporate their values into their work to become activist architects. Active and experiential learning techniques such as role play, reflective writing, small and large group discussions, site visits to firms with guest presenters covering topics such as salary negotiation, possible roles in a firm, and possible roles in allied fields give students the opportunity and confidence to take-on, practice, and implement their ethical beliefs on subjective issues such as social, economic, and ecological justice.

The course is designed to be more akin to a design studio, giving students agency to determine their own value judgments, responsibilities, and goals, and to design a career path to match those limitations. Two main assignments, firm interviews with two existing architectural practices and the creation of a business plan, give the students the opportunity to first understand how existing architectural workers apply activism to their practice, and then to design their own method for applying their self-identified ethical goals. An analysis of the course is given using data from an anonymous survey of recent graduates from the program done in February of 2023, with a discussion of current literature.

INTRODUCTION

We teach architecture students to design buildings creatively and proactively, but often instruct them to adhere to a normative career path. Students are commonly told they will have to work late to meet deadlines and sacrifice to make a difference in the field. They are implicitly told the same thing by programs that expect high attrition and professors who encourage competitive study environments and extreme focus on a single studio course. They are taught that their agency in the world is limited to their product. Worse still, they are taught that unless they can sustain low pay and hard hours for several years, they do not belong in the field.

This paper will examine the results of a case study professional practice course given at the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture and Community Development (SACD) between the years 2019-2022, which approaches work, career, and ambitions more as a studio design project than a lecture on “how-it-is.” It will show that the typically overlooked professional practice course can be the key to an architect’s entry into the field as an activist for social, economic, and ecological justice. The paper will also discuss the responsibility professional practice courses have in creating more equitable access to the field.

The research presented in this paper shares not only the approach to teaching professional practice but also real outcomes evaluated through the lens of questionnaires from past students and student evaluations of the course. The paper shows that creating a course which presents students with a realistic understanding of the challenges they will face in an imperfect professional field, gives them critical thinking tools to cope with these challenges with resilience and grit, while also developing their capacity to actively work to reform the profession, either from within an existing system or by creating new work models. This will help diversify the field and in turn encourages new architects to support and work for their diverse communities.

CONTEXT

Two elements of the university’s location impact how the course has developed. First, the course is taught in the urban context of Detroit. The city is famed for its hustle culture, an exploitive form of capitalism which treats entrepreneurship as gritty insistence on ambition versus a career.¹ This runs parallel to representations of architecture as a labor of love that is often undervalued. Many people entering the profession in Detroit see themselves as starving artists who must do pro-bono work to make any meaningful impact. As a practicing architect working in Detroit for over 25 years I lean on my experiences as examples of potential rewards and risks as a working architect who is also a dissident intellectual and activist. My research on collectivist architecture and alternative practice models including employee-owned and cooperative firms as well as different organizational structures such as mutual aid organizations, farmers collectives, labor unions, and other activist collective groups helps provide greater depth to this discussion.

Second, the SACD, is international. Around 30% of students come from nearby Canada, which means I teach the different ways architecture is practiced in those two countries. This is notable in that it opens our class discussions to the idea that there is a plurality of ways to work.

COURSE STRUCTURE

The Profession of Practice course is structured to build student agency, confidence, and critical analysis of the architectural profession, while also reviewing content required by the SACD and NAAB. The course provides students with information on becoming a practicing professional architect, as well as alternative practice models, and allied fields which are available to students. But it also asks students to design their own firm. In so doing students become aware of their agency in what they do and how they do it. By asking them to do this within the framework of their self-selected thesis topics, they are quickly introduced to their power to affect change socially, economically, and ecologically. Students become agents of change advancing the causes most important to them, whether they choose a traditional career path or not.

There are 20-30 students in the course, which is one of two lecture seminar courses run in the 5th year of an accelerated five-year accredited Master of Architecture program. The second course is a Construction Law course that covers standard contracts, liability, and business structures, which is run in the opposite semester, and is taught by a lawyer. Students come into my course with experience in the field having completed two semesters of cooperative experience, where they work at a paid position in an architecture or allied field office, typically in the summers of their 3rd and 4th years. The course uses four scaffolded target topics: logistics of business, personal responsibility, work-life balance, and empathy among working partners.

Logistics of business refers to the knowledge students gain in this course on how a business runs, including: cash flow, overhead, employee tax rates, contract labor versus employee status, productivity measures, capacity, project management, client management, client and project contracts, contract language, marketing and promotion.

Personal responsibility assignments encourage students to reflect on how they want to operate when they enter the workforce. They are asked to reflect on what they would like to provide to their firms, colleagues, bosses, clients, communities, families, and themselves. Students are also introduced to ethics inquiries and thinking.

Work-life balance assignments reflect on time management and how they can accommodate all their identified personal responsibilities. It asks students to consider their limits and how they will handle being at their limit. It also asks them to reflect on the effect their identified personal responsibilities will have on the world around them, from friends, family, and colleagues to

the plants, animals, and insects which will be impacted by their projects. I call this a life-based design approach, which builds empathy across all beings impacted by design work. It is a view of work-life balance which is based on scales of communities rather than contained within an individual.

Empathy among working partners expands on this life-based design approach. Assignments ask students to embody the role of a partner in a firm, a new employee, a client, a contractor, an engineer. They are taught that design work is not us versus them, but that each role can positively impact the design. Communication, conflict resolution, and contract negotiation skills are presented within the complex framework of differing goals, responsibilities, and expectations.

Through the assignments students obtain the skills, tools, and support they will need to excel in their chosen career path. It introduces students to the field's shifting understanding of how work is done and by whom, considering working from home, the rising labor movement, and an unreliable economic outlook.

COURSE CONTENT

The course meets one day a week and is organized primarily around lectures, discussions and two major group assignments; an interview assignment and a business plan in which teams develop a proposal based on shared values and interests surrounding their ongoing thesis work. The course relies on active self-reflection and uses readings, blog entries, group discussion, self-assessment activities, role-play, office site visits and drawn narratives to establish their own value sets, develop skills to enact those values within their work, and build their confidence to do so once they enter the field.²

Although the final output of the course is a business plan for a values and research based architecture firm, it is not the intention of the course to suggest that all the students should or will want to start their own practice, become licensed or even work directly in architecture. The key to the assignment is to build empathy for all the components that make up a firm, as well as engineers, contractors, and clients, so students can at once understand the potential roles they can play within the field along with the ability to challenge the status quo, or at least have a better understanding of why the standards are what they are today.

FOUNDATION BUILDING

On the first day of class students present their thesis research topic, how they believe that their thesis could be part of a professional career, introduce their extracurricular interests, reflect on their cooperative work experiences, and identify their biggest concerns about entering practice. These presentations start a discussion on the students' values and motivations, which is reflected on and challenged throughout the semester.

Following the introductions, I present a lecture and assign a series of readings on time management. Students chart the use of

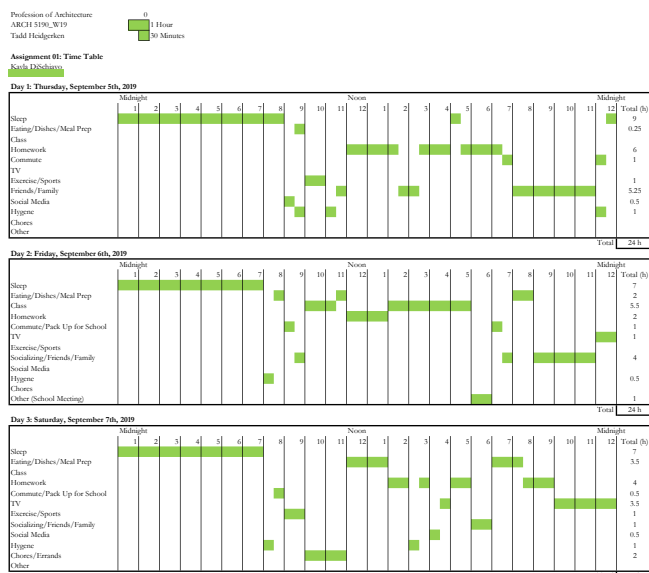


Figure 1. Time Table Assignment. Student Sample.

their time over a three-day period, becoming more self-aware of how their values, interests and goals are reflected, or not reflected, in how they use their time.

This tool evolves over the semester eventually developing in to a Gantt chart that the students use to schedule the tasks of the two group assignments. This skill building exercise allows the students to actively use a common tool type in the field while promoting healthy time management and work-life balance.

The last tool that is introduced on the first day of class is a reflective questionnaire that collects their thoughts on the field and on their motivations to be architects. It is assigned several times throughout the semester and tracks how those thoughts are altered by the readings, discussions, site visits, and assignments.

The first half of the semester is reading heavy and a series of large and small group discussions build students' understanding of the readings. We use these to discuss where people in the past thought the field was going, if we still feel those ideas are relevant and if so, how have they evolved.

The discussions are paired with written individual blog assignments prior to class. Students come prepared with different perspectives of the readings. Each of the readings, discussions, and reflective writing exercises in the course are intended to scaffold into the two major assignments, the firm interviews and the design of their own firm.

The students' verbalized goals and interests, the thinking assessment questionnaire, the readings, reflective writings, and class discussions form the first step of an active and experiential learning process which will, over the course of the semester, help

students develop the strategies and confidence to apply their values to their future work.³

Lectures align with readings and leverage the differences in how firms practice in the USA and Canada to help students form more concrete opinions on how practice should be for them.

FIRM INTERVIEWS

Students work together to identify local and non-local architecture firms to interview for their first major assignment. Students are asked individually to gather a list of firms based on different areas of their individual missions, potential client typologies, and services they wish to provide. In groups they categorize then select a local and non-local firm to interview. They are encouraged to look internationally to identify firms that align with their group's mission statement.

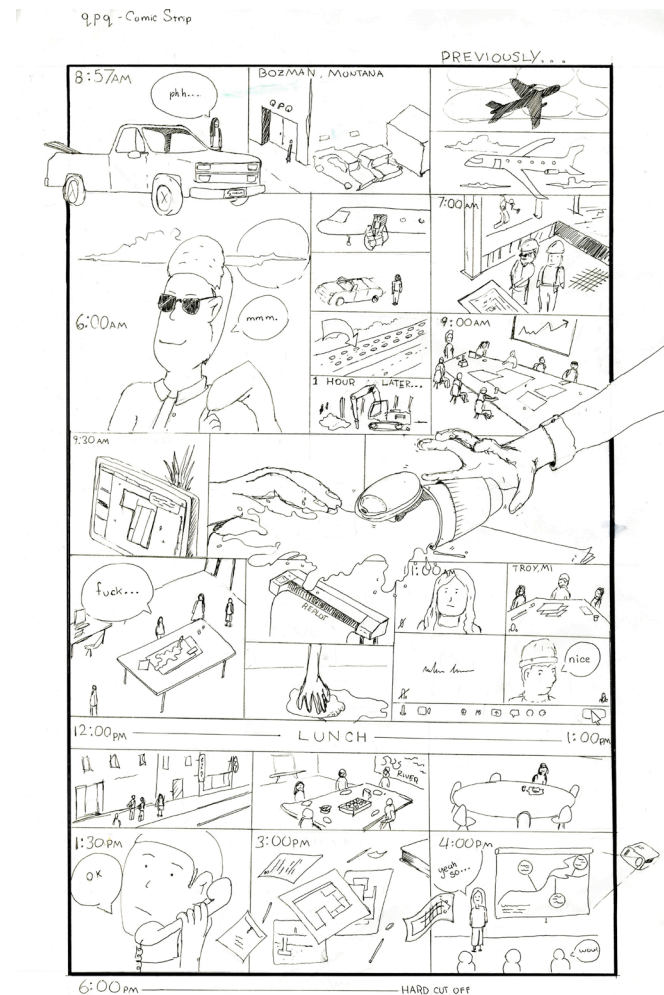


Figure 2. Day-in-the-Life Cartoon Assignment. Student Sample.

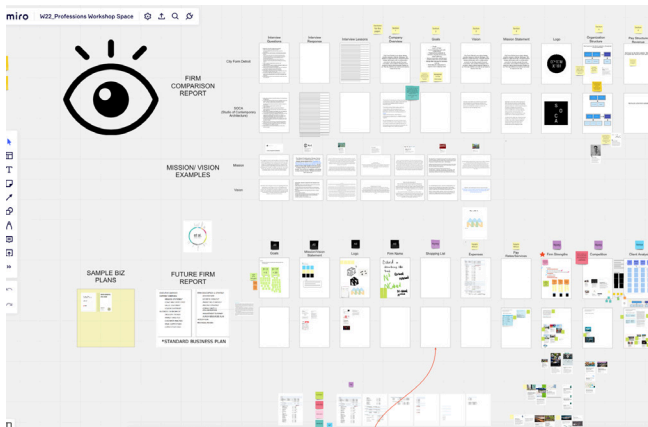


Figure 3. Class Discussion. Author

Following the interviews, students are asked to do a critical analysis of each firm. They are provided a rigorous template format which asks them to identify elements from each firm that will be discussed in their own business plans including values, strategic position and marketing, mission and vision statements, organizational structures, compensation, and profit plans.

The firm interviews are used to build confidence in the students, especially for future job interviews. They remind students that they do not need to think only of getting a job, but that they can identify firms that align with their own goals.

BUSINESS PLAN

The business plan assignment ties together the outcomes of student thinking on the topics discussed over the semester in the course. Students have identified their values and responsibilities, talked about their experiences in the field so far, read numerous articles, gone on trips, listened to visiting presenters, interviewed firms aligning with their goals and responsibilities, and they end by synthesizing that active and experiential learning to propose new ways of working in impactful ways.

Students use the above experience to organize a group proposal, delivered as a business plan, in which they take a stance on topics such as office missions, organizational structure and size, identify income streams, proposed benefits packages and develop a budget based on the type of practice they wish to run. The students identify an audience for the report such as a bank, a community organization, a client pitch, or municipal government as a way of prioritizing the content to achieve a goal which aligns with their final values and mission.

During the presentation their colleagues take on the role of the identified audience and each student is provided a form to fill out during the presentation that critiques the success of project and areas of improvement. This along with a personal markup of the document by me are given to the groups to make revisions prior to the final submission; encouraging student to take the reflections and assessments further.

LEARNING STRATEGIES

The course uses active and experiential learning to embrace subjective content. Students reflect on “critical incidents,” experiences which are challenging or present a “disorienting dilemma,” such as salary negotiations.⁴ Students decide what is just, equitable, and respectful and create strategies to implement their values, then use active experimentation to test their theory using tools such as role play and group discussion, then use written reflection to revise their ideas for handling these situations which better align with the students’ values.⁵ In the scenario of salary negotiation this reflects what they believe is fair in terms of salary, retirement, healthcare, vacation time, and other negotiable items like flexible schedules, work from home and access to licensing support.

Students prepare for the exercise by reviewing resources such as the AIA Survey Salary Calculator, along with a personal budget reflecting their income needs. After the exercise they complete a survey that lists the benefits they anticipate receiving from a firm along with the reasoning.

Other examples include the day in a life cartoon exercises that ask students to visualize different experiences from their past or from the firms they are designing in class from the position of employee, employer, and client. The assignment requires the students to communicate visually their potential impact in the field, their firm and in the community. The tool builds empathy while reflection develops goals and the strategies to meet those goals.

ANALYSIS

Through an anonymous online survey⁶ that was launched in February 2023, I compiled data from alumni of the SACD graduate program related to the effectiveness of the course in preparing them for their post-graduation transition and ongoing professional experiences. The 40-question survey had 46 participants from the 2019-2022 graduating classes with 17 people completing the survey and 29 people dropping out of the survey prior to completion. Although the number of responses is limited, the survey provided insights that will be used to update the course and develop new tools for ongoing course assessments that hope to provide a healthier transition for the students into their post-graduation professional or non-professional lives.

Of the 17 completed surveys 78% of the respondents were living in the United States along with 20% from Canada and 2% from Poland. More than half of the respondents identified as male, at 65%, with 35% identifying as female, which is not proportionate to our student graduates. SACD is 54% female to 46% male. 70% of the respondents identified as Caucasian/white, which is also not representative of our graduate student body which was 58% during 2019-2022, indicating more efforts need to be made to gather the full diverse experiences of our graduates.

MISSION STATEMENT

Our mission at InCoRe is to provide superior design for educational facilities while working on a variety of architectural and urban design competitions to progress the innovation of competition deliverables and InCoRe's research base.

VISION STATEMENT

InCoRe consistently strives to create community influenced educational design by understanding history, demographics, site specifics, and the current needs of the area while collaborating with other firms on competitions to enhance our knowledge and grow our project typologies.

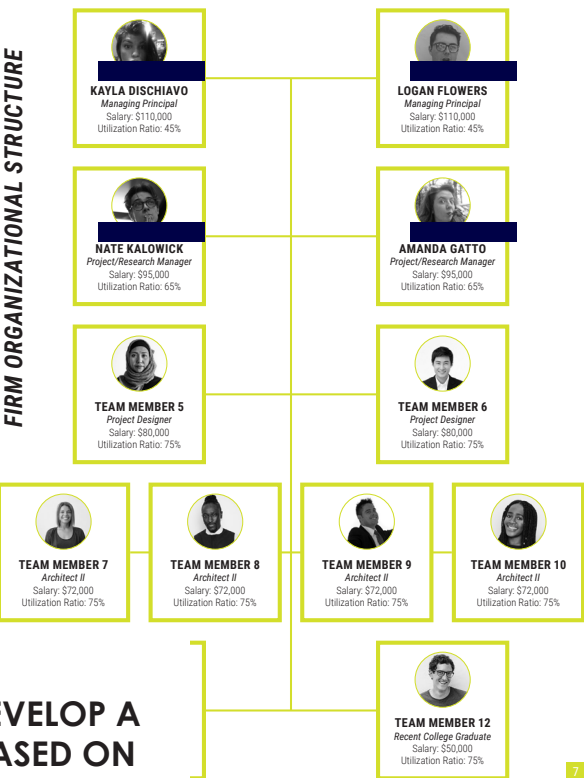
VALUE STATEMENT

InCoRe values innovation, collaboration, and contemporary research. We promote urban design integration in all of their projects, community research and site development, studying and understanding changing landscapes including politically, environmentally, physically and socially, creating quality graphics, and experimental and innovative solutions to problems.

GOALS & OBJECTIVES

Our goal is to diversify InCoRe's portfolio through competitions, basing in educational design, implementing new research techniques through working with the community.

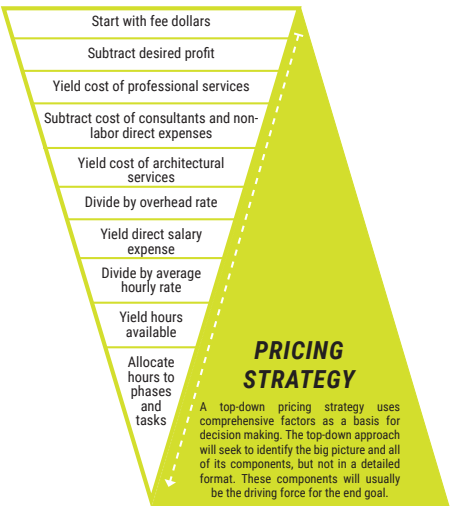
FIRM ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE



THE TEAMS DEVELOP A PROPOSAL BASED ON THEIR MISSION AND BUILT UPON PREVIOUS ASSIGNMENTS

CONSULTANTS & COLLABORATORS

InCoRe prides itself on its communication with outside entities. For certain design projects and competition typologies that do not fall directly within our range of expertise, we utilize consultation with a number of businesses who have worked more closely with projects of that nature. Collaboration with individuals such as School Board Officials, Community members, Parents, and Students, is pivotal for delivering the stimulating and efficient learning environment that InCoRe has come to be known for. On the competition side of our projects, consultation with firms that have more knowledge in the subject than we do has proved very useful, not only for the individual project but also for our firm as a whole in the long run. With the help of Civil and Environmental Engineers, along with Landscape Architects, our knowledge of these areas continues to grow, and we are able to produce high-quality designs, which are tailored to, and thoughtful of all of the nuanced factors of the site and its context.



HR PLAN

As an up and coming firm, InCoRe thoroughly appreciates all of its employees who have helped the company grow, and continue to exemplify the vision the partners have for the firm. We understand that health and peace of mind are paramount for a happy and productive work environment. InCoRe offers its lower-level employees the same health plan as its higher-ranking ones, which covers medical necessities. As our company grows, we have plans to add to our list of benefits, in hopes to promote healthy living outside the office. Our proposed plan would feature a much more customizable form of coverage, with each employee being able to choose what they find to be most rewarding or pertinent; whether it be Medical, Lifestyle, or Special Services. Currently, InCoRe offers a Non-Elective 401k, with a 3% match to any and all eligible employees.



MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

As a young and diverse architectural design firm, InCoRe values the demands of our employees, partners, and clients. We offer flexible paid time off which includes vacation, sick days, personal days, federal holidays, leaves of absence, and days for bereavement, which will be determined on a case by case basis. Flexible working hours are permitted for all employees, with the understanding that a minimum of 40 hours per week is imperative. Summer working hours are also permitted for employees. We promote a healthy and sustainable lifestyle at InCoRe, so non-smokers will be authorized for an extra 5 days off. Expecting mothers and fathers will also be given appropriate paid time off. We are transparent with our staff, partners, and clients through each process.

Demographics were also collected to determine the type of experiences the respondents have had since graduating such as work history and the size of the firm they are currently employed at. 94% of the respondents work in architecture with most of the respondents, 53%, working in firms over 30 people, 18% working at firms between 16-30, 12% at 6-15 persons and 18% in firms of 5 and less.

The results from the survey show strong support for the information provided in the course:

[I found the course very helpful. At the time of taking it, I had already been working in the profession for a little while (since the summer after my freshmen year), and I still learned quite a bit.... I recently have revisited some of the work in this course, as I am preparing to take the PCM ARE soon.]

—Survey Respondent

Additionally, students provided feedback on specific assignments, field trips, visiting professionals and group discussions that confirm the students understood the intention of the course and course assignments. The goal of the course was “to understand many different avenues of being an ‘architect,’ ways to approach it, and ways to organize your practice.”

Role play and mock scenarios were identified as some of the most useful exercises for their job interviews and pay negotiations with 25% of respondent self-reporting that it was the most memorable experience and extremely helpful when entering the field. 18% responded that the assignments significantly assisted them on pay negotiations during their professional interviews and 53% of the students felt these assignments assisted “a little” and 29% saying it didn’t assist.

Despite the relative success of the course in helping graduates negotiate their initial salaries, only a few showed a clear understanding of how these skills translated into asking for raises. Only 35% of respondents have asked for a raise, despite 35% feeling that they are under compensated for their current level of experience. Yet 71% of respondents who have asked for a raise have gotten one, underlining a clear need for the course to give more detailed information on the socially complicated process of asking for a raise at a firm one is already invested in. Future assignments should expose students to techniques for negotiating pay raises after the initial hiring process.

64% of respondents noted that they have good work-life balance always or most of the time, with 24% of people responding either only once in a while or never having a balance. Their responses to the amount of control they feel in their schedule seem to correlate to reported satisfaction of work-life balance with 30% selecting they “always” have control, 46% “most of the time,” 18% “once in a while” and 18% “never.”

Since several respondents do not report remembering the work-life balance exercises from the course, some revisions to these assignments need to be implemented. The majority of these assignments in the course are reflective writing, and because they are subjective in nature are not as clearly set in students’ minds as lessons. This is similar to findings by Ferguson, et al. where students had strong opinions either in favor of or against reflective writing. In their study students valued reflective writing assignments for emotive and cognitive reasons, including a greater sense of social connection to their peers and increasing their overall learning. Students in their student who did not favor reflective writing tended to see it as busy work.⁶ Ferguson et al. conclude that clear prompts are needed throughout the course to allow students the ability to acknowledge the value of the assignments and retain the lessons.⁷ More should be done in the course to scaffold the process onto all the assignments during the semester. Currently students are asked to create Gantt charts using Microsoft Excel because it is accessible, but other affordable or free software should be explored that would allow me to provide feedback throughout the semester and provide assessment beyond a pass/fail grade.

The respondents provided input on how the course could support managing their expectations of entering the field knowing that they will have limited knowledge and experience. 35% of the graduates mentioned that they felt judged because of their age or lack of time in the field and believed this to limit their potential and opportunities.

[There’s still a lot of ageism and sexism. I’m automatically paid less because of my age regardless of my ability. The major [sic] of the leadership roles in my company are all older men. As much as there are women in the field, they hold much lesser positions of power and the few women that do have power don’t have children. It really sends the message to me that In [sic] order to succeed in architecture, my family life will have to suffer.]

—Survey Respondent

Based on the success of the role play activities, I plan to develop acting scenarios to address ageism, sexism, and racism more directly, empowering students to develop techniques to address these in the course of their career. At the same time, and in particular relating to feelings of inexperience, I want to help students frame their growth and increasing experience as important wins along a sustainable career, and that their roles when they start their work will not and should not be permanent. To do this, it has been helpful to bring in visiting speakers to talk about their journeys to bring awareness that not every firm culture is a good fit, which was not possible during the 2020-21 years of this study. I believe that returning to the classroom with speakers will help resolve this issue.

The final insight I would like to discuss relates to the core of the course's focus on impact and happiness. When asked about whether their work was impactful to their community there was a resounding 77% of respondents affirming their work is making an impact. However, when asked whether their work was fulfilling only 47% said "most of the time," 29% "about half of the time," 12% "once in a while," and 12% "never." This indicates a clear mismatch on purpose and feelings of success in their purpose. I plan to include a reflective writing assignment on student's self-identified markers of success over time, giving students a more realistic expectation for themselves and helping them to identify strategies to recognize the cumulative impact of their efforts. I hope this will help them maintain their sense of purpose without burning out.

CONCLUSION

Using examples of student work, student evaluations, alumni interviews, and alumni activities this qualitative research assessed the successes of a critical design approach to professional practice courses. I examined the types of assignments in the course showing the type of thinking each assignment introduces to students.

Next steps in the development of the research include creating a stronger assessment tool and making a better set of guidelines for how to approach reflective writing to increase student understanding of the capacity for these assignments. Additionally, efforts are being made within the SACD to develop modules to expose students to topics of professional practice in undergraduate years. This includes a new building code module as well as developing lectures for the first year Introduction to Architecture course.

Finally, I am interviewing firms across North America to identify additional insights on how location and regional jurisdictions alter how we practice and expanding the perspectives on how to create a more equitable profession through dissident professional practice.

Radical dreams for better futures come from people who care deeply for the world around them without sacrificing their own wellbeing. Dissidents are deep thinkers who can critically assess the current context to understand what works and what does not. They are unafraid to forcefully demand change. Dissident designers can be trained by giving students a rigorous introduction to the reality of the architectural profession as it stands today along with the tools they need to exercise their power to change that profession for the better. This gives students the capacity and endurance to not just effect change in their field, but to make the conditions of the world more fair, just and equitable. They understand that by doing so their work as professionals will be easier, more fulfilling, and more sustainable.

ENDNOTES

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