

CONNECT

A Living Document for the University of Minnesota College of Design's Coordinated Action Planning (CAP)

Evolving the College of Design through Strengthening Relationships

"Be the change you want to see."

— attributed to Mahatma Gandhi, referenced in a College Assembly

"Human actions are depleting Earth's natural capital, putting such strain on the environment that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."

— Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

"A new type of thinking is essential if mankind is to survive and move toward higher levels."

— Albert Einstein

"Many big design ideas are in the borders, cutting across disciplines."

— a CDes stakeholder

Based on long-standing themes of discussion in and around the College of Design (CDes), and on projections of what the world will need in the next ~30 years, this document frames actions we can take now in order to align CDes resources and advance our research and curricula.

With both academic and professional programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels, CDes has emerged during the past decade as a microcosm of the University. Collectively, our work as designers, makers, retailers practitioners, and scholars touches nearly every aspect of people's lives. Our shared goal is to support students as they prepare to become creative leaders in an uncertain world, advancing the common good through work that is socially responsible and environmentally sustainable.

The overarching sentiment expressed through the CAP process is that CDes members want to feel more like a community, maintaining our distinct strengths while sharing an identity and sense of purpose. We want to be innovative, adventurous, and daring in addressing 21st-century challenges.

Noting the importance of "interdisciplinarity" for this charge, CDes colleagues assert the need to maintain well-developed areas of knowledge that, through relating, can prompt new questions and form new knowledge. Distinct disciplines, we believe, are the premise of interdisciplinarity. Therefore, CDes members want to continue characterizing the College through deep, strong disciplines that have their own identities — while developing a more coherent collegiate culture and collective identity.

We believe that by leveraging our disciplinary strengths and collaborative skills, we can help to address needs of our increasingly complex world. We can maintain distinctiveness while crossing disciplinary boundaries, giving the same priority to *relationships between* entities as to the entities themselves. We need to connect, not merge, CDes disciplines by creating structures that allow ideas and people to flow to and from.



Strength-through-connection is not a new idea: the natural world abounds with examples of things that work better together than as a collection of separate parts. Naturally occurring ecosystems can be both metaphor and model for organizing discrete entities, through connections that define mutually beneficial relationships.

Healthy ecosystems achieve their resilience through networked structures in which every constituent both gives and receives life-sustaining services. Each entity gives something to the whole and gets something in return. Particular kinds of relationships among the entities determine the flow of resources and ideas. These relationships are essential to the well-being of the whole system: *they are as important as the entities they connect.*

Much of the work we need to do in the College involves increasing our interconnectedness. By looking at relationships (not just separate units) and focusing on interactions between disciplines and subcultures, we can develop a vibrant community — a healthy ecosystem based on creativity, capable of preparing students to innovate in a fast-paced world.

“Unbounded growth requires accelerating cycles of innovation to avoid collapse.”

— Geoffrey West

Better connecting, as an overall approach for advancing the College, heeds resounding calls to develop a shared identity, a coherent culture, an overarching sense of community among CDes stakeholders. The “connecting” approach can also ameliorate the feeling of isolation that many people have expressed.

Going forward, we need to identify where connections are needed but missing and where connections already exist but may need strengthening, loosening, or realigning. Where something seems awry, we need to distinguish symptoms from causes. In some cases, we may already have the right structure, but ineffective communication or coordination. In other cases, we may need entirely new connecting structures.

We are proceeding carefully, mindful of the systems principle that a small intervention can have a big, sometimes unpredictable, effect. Changes will happen in an evolutionary manner, sometimes proceeding through multiple phases. We are experimenting by piloting ideas, then assessing them and adjusting as we scale up worthy initiatives.

CDes stakeholders are formulating initiatives according to actions

identified through the CAP process. We are linking priorities to resources, guided by collectively articulated values.

CDes Vision and Values

“The best jobs in the future are going to be what I call ‘STEMpathy’ jobs — jobs that blend STEM skills (science, technology, engineering, math) with human empathy. We don’t know what many of them will look like yet.”
— Minnesotan author Thomas Friedman

“Why would you design something if it didn’t improve the human condition?”
— Niels Diffrient

“Research on complex systems — from human and animal social dynamics to ecosystems to cities — shows that diversity within a system can improve resilience, robustness and adaptability.”
— Santa Fe Institute

What do we think the world will look like 30 years from now? And therefore, what do we think the College should look like? How can our desired future help to determine actions we can take now? How can a broad understanding of design, along with collectively held values, guide our actions? How can students prepare to reinvent themselves, repeatedly, post-graduation?

While no one can predict specific outcomes, we can foresee needs to deal with general trends that are already underway. Our students will continue to encounter dramatic advances in technology, large-scale changes in Earth’s climate, and shifting demographics worldwide. Alumni will need to seek new knowledge and engage new learning as they proceed in their careers and throughout their lives.

We anticipate the CDes ethos being perceptible in well-designed products, homes, schools, workplaces, shops, playgrounds, neighborhoods, means of transport, systems for communication, and services for learning and community-building. Wherever they go, whatever they do, our alumni will feel ongoing connection to the College because of the actions we take now. Those actions will be tempered by both the value we offer to the world and the ideals we strive to uphold.

CDes stakeholders describe various sensibilities that affect *how* we conduct our work. The primary CDes values of *diversity, collaboration, flexibility, resilience, excellence*, and the *self-awareness* needed for effective *ongoing learning* are guiding the formulation and prioritization of CAP actions.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion are vital to CDes stakeholders: We understand the value of multiple perspectives as a basic tenet of good design. With changing demographics and continued emergence of global culture, it’s all the more important for our students to learn methods for collaborating with a wide range of people.

Collaboration forms the contexts from which diverse perspectives create transformative solutions. Effective collaboration depends on

"It is not the most intellectual of the species that survives; it is not the strongest that survives; but the species that survives is the one that is able best to adapt and adjust to the changing environment in which it finds itself."

— Leon C. Megginson,
interpreting Charles Darwin

"The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn."

— Alvin Toffler

trust in our design process and for one another. By strengthening and judiciously expanding partnerships, we can enact the University's land/sea/space-grant mission while improving the quality of design outcomes and increasing revenues for particular projects and the College overall.

Flexibility and resilience go hand in hand, like adaptability and agility. We need to give up things that no longer work or that serve interests of only a few people, in order to make room for potentials to benefit all of our students and the common good of everyone in the College. Modeling these values now, within the College, will help our students learn how to enact them later, as they work in their professional fields.

Excellence results when we fully enact our values and creative process, in response to changes affecting our local and global communities. CDes stakeholders are calling for a College that is nimble, connected, collaborative, and therefore more in command of our future. Our increasingly diverse students must become fluent with ever-evolving technologies, as they prepare for practice as collaborators who are highly skilled, discerning, and ethically grounded.

Self-awareness among individuals leads to better learning; among a collective such as CDes, it can lead to more effective work. Self-awareness is the crux of the theme to develop our collective identity and project it throughout our communications and the spaces we occupy. CDes stakeholders believe that by clarifying our shared purpose and the values we uphold, we can become "a better version of ourselves." We need to look both toward the future and back to what we have already done. Recognizing that design interventions can sometimes have negative impacts, we need to learn from our mistakes.

Creativity and learning: A deeply important though subtly articulated value is our time-honored pedagogy, based on learning through creative processes. Designers enact a way of knowing the world through listening and generating, selecting and discarding, evolving and honing. Material forms and interrelated processes result as traces of the creative work. The results become valuable not only as designed solutions, but means for evaluating the very process that generated them: we can assess students' learning by looking at iterative steps in their creative process. Studio-based learning is expensive in terms of square footage dedicated to the creative environments, equipping and staffing spaces for "making," and relatively low student:faculty ratios;

yet this mode of learning is highly effective. It is at once social and personally meaningful, supporting collaborative work while encouraging development of individual skills, knowledge, and identity — and providing evidence of learning through artifacts whose functional and aesthetic value can be readily assessed.

As we aim to prepare students to deal with an uncertain future, we may find assurance in the idea that they emerge from the College not only well versed in design, but as proficient learners. CDes graduates are prepared to form an identity as facile, lifelong learners, as well as any particular kind of scholar, designer, or other practitioner. This agility will serve them well: identifying primarily as a learner could equate to survival skill, as 21st-century challenges accelerate.

Workplace projections suggest we cannot expect our students to stay in one job for their entire career. They may move from one company to the next, they may start a firm and then work for someone else, they may practice one design discipline and then shift. We need to prepare them for a future that is unknown to them and unknown to us. To navigate the unknown, they need a solid base of design skills and the confidence that they can learn new things as needed.

Faculty and staff, as well, need to be open to new ideas. We need to question habits and welcome new ways of thinking and working. When individuals throughout CDes dedicate themselves to ongoing adaptation, the College will emerge collectively as a “learning organization” well positioned for the next 30 years and more.

Our overall strategy is to strengthen and create college-wide connections to improve curricula, research, spaces, and operations. We will better connect the college to external resources and better connect with each other, so we can make best use of our expertise, facilities, and other assets. These evolutions are interrelated and will take time to achieve. We must approach many of them incrementally, rather than trying to effect an immediate change when multiple factors are involved. Pilot programs will allow us to experiment with multifaceted changes before implementing them full-scale.

Enacting the strategy to *connect*, we will put students first, tune our curricular offerings, and communicate our collegiate value to stakeholders, while addressing global-scale problems, serving nearby communities, and preparing our students for jobs that don’t yet exist.

“Learning organizations are ‘organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.’”

— Peter Senge

“Make us whole.”

— echoed throughout the CAP data

Connect is the concise statement of the predominant theme in the CAP data, to “make us whole.”

Resolution

“Sometimes, the only thing people hate worse than the status quo is any change at all.”

— Jacob Frey, mayor of Minneapolis

Through ambitious actions now, CDes can advance collectively, eager to position our students as creative leaders able to navigate an unknowable and increasingly complex future. Helping them to prepare will require cooperation among everyone in the College, aware of trade-offs and committed to the give-and-take that becoming “whole” demands.

We can define organizational structures that distribute work equitably and enhance our ability to support students, generate resources, and use them wisely. We can reach beyond current disciplines to create “common core” curricula and interdisciplinary programs. We can convene and collaborate, to form a collegiate ethos that students and graduates will remember for the rest of their lives. We can welcome alumni as they return, decade after decade, to learn more and to inform generation after generation of CDes designers, makers, and scholars. We can create a College that cultivates deep disciplines while readily adapting to a quickly changing world.

We can connect.

