

## Mentoring Interns: A Firm Commitment

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### WHEN FIRMS MENTOR INTERNS, THE WHOLE PROFESSION WINS

Jonathan Kanda, AIA, newly licensed, and Jeffrey DeGregorio, Assoc. AIA, an intern, brought forth an idea at Payette Associates two years ago. They approached the leadership of the 150-person firm with a plan to hold regular educational programs for the firm's interns in a format tied closely to NCARB's Intern Development Program (IDP).



Jonathan Kanda, AIA

### MAKING THE CASE FOR THE PROGRAM

With advice from firm associate George Takoudes, AIA, on how to make a convincing case within the company, Jeff and Jonathan made a formal presentation for a new educational program to be called the Young Designers Core (YDC) that included a clear mission statement and a defined structure and organization. YDC would have a strong link to IDP and would benefit both interns



Jeffrey DeGregorio, Assoc. AIA

and the firm as a whole. Through YDC, Jeff and Jonathan proposed to link all levels of the firm together, which turned out to be among its strongest selling points.

As with any design problem, the authors began with a problem statement. The principals and associates already had their respective organizational groups with regular meetings and current activities. Yet here was a large portion of the firm—the young designers—without an organizational structure and with a variety of experience and training levels. At any one time, 30–40 percent of the firm's staff had zero to five years of experience. This group needed focus, attention, and a voice in the firm; organized intern education and training

to provide a solid foundation to the firm's work; freer knowledge-transfer among people in the office; and a way to archive the information being shared.

### GETTING STARTED

The “schematic design” solution was simply to activate the group. Payette Associates had always had a culture of learning and mentoring; the YDC was a way to channel and organize it. The underlying goal would be to help this group of interns get through IDP and the Architectural Registration Exam (ARE). At the same time, the firm would benefit in terms of enhanced project performance.

The original plan called for twice-a-month learning events. Jim Collins, the firm president, challenged the group to meet weekly, and the challenge was accepted. With the variety of daily activity in the office, weekly learning and training opportunities were not difficult to identify. To measure and record the learning experience, Jeff and Jonathan developed a simple matrix showing the scheduled events on the y-axis and IDP competency categories on the x-axis.



George Takoudes, AIA

### EARLY BENEFITS

Among the benefits that became apparent early:

- Interns are introduced earlier to the range of topics related to IDP, including project-management and contract-negotiation, which are among the most difficult IDP categories to fulfill.
- Cross-team and cross-functional communication improved. The YDC has fostered relationships among young designers in different studios and between young designers and principals and associates. Cross-communication is much easier because everyone now appreciates what others in the firm know and are interested in knowing.

- YDC created an opportunity for cross-cultural communication with other Boston architecture firms. The YDC sponsored a co-tour of a building completed by another firm, meeting with the other firm's young designers at the site. This fostered awareness and appreciation of learning opportunities beyond the firm's own work.

## SUCCESS REQUIRES DILIGENCE

Among the challenges of maintaining a quality program is that it requires constant attention, energy, and commitment on the part of the program coordinators. Some events are easily planned—when someone has a presentation already prepared, for instance. Outside speakers require more homework. It is important to meet with the prospective speaker in advance, and even go through a dry run of their presentation to ensure that it is focused on the intended audience, young designers. Design pinups for interns are also part of the program, a Socratic method familiar to interns from architectural school, but one with which they lose touch until they advance to a certain level of experience in the firm.

As YDC program coordinators, Jeff and Jonathan volunteer their own time. They consider it a contribution to the firm and their own professional development. The firm, on the other hand, provides the necessary support for needed tangible resources—presentation materials, refreshments, meals, vehicle rental, and the like. The firm is also supportive in allowing Jeff and Jonathan to adjust their work schedules to meet with outside speakers when necessary.

## BUILDING THE PROGRAM

As the YDC got underway, Jeff and Jonathan identified as top priorities the IDP categories for which it is most difficult for interns to earn credit. They invited the firm's chief financial officer to talk to the group. They recruited people in the field, including subcontractors and manufacturers, people with whom interns have little direct, daily contact.

In addition to running the program, Jeff and Jonathan maintain a YDC Web site on the firm's office intranet. The site includes documentation of all seminars, photographs of site visits, PowerPoint presentations or handouts of past programs, contact information for speakers and experts, a schedule of upcoming YDC events, and links to other resources on the firm's extensive intranet knowledge base.

Interestingly, the process of assembling material for the IDP-award submission was itself a learning experience. It fostered an awareness of the breadth and depth of experience and knowledge within the firm, and the importance of capturing that knowledge for use by others in the future. The YDC Web site augments the knowledge disseminated through mentorship and seminars. As new employees join the firm, they are able to access the archive, view presentations, read the collected information, and identify people with whom to speak directly about a particular subject.



## THE SUPPORTING FRAMEWORK

YDC is the cornerstone of Payette's intern development program, enhancing the firm's reputation as a terrific place for interns to learn about providing broad-based services and broad-based excellence.

But YDC is only one part of a comprehensive staff-development strategy that includes reimbursement for the cost of the ARE. Fulfillment of IDP requirements is also an integral part of annual employee performance reviews. The IDP requirements provide supervisors with a framework for evaluating an employee's competencies and identifying areas for further development.

## FIRM-WIDE BENEFITS

The value of archiving and sharing the collective knowledge of the firm cannot be overstated. Payette is organized in three different design studios—architecture, landscape, and interiors—and until recently each studio provided its own training. The knowledge of the office was not being leveraged for all. One studio might have a terrific lunch presentation, for which only one-third of the office would benefit.

From the principals' perspective, another major benefit is training all junior staff at once. It can be inefficient to explain bathroom layout individually to every intern assigned to draw one. One of the first presentations offered, then, was bathroom layout. Other presenters may talk about hospital and lab planning, a core competency of the firm.

## **PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

YDC is great for a 150-person firm with the initiative and resources to fulfill its professional responsibility of training interns. What of the interns who find themselves in firms that cannot or will not provide adequate training? Programs developed by the profession through the AIA and its chapters are the key.

As Payette developed its in-house program, George worked with the Boston Society of Architects on the Young Designers Professional Development Institute, now in its fourth year. The Institute offers an annual 12-part lunchtime seminar series to provide intern development education and training, to help bridge that gap from zero to five years of experience.

The Young Designers PD Institute is based on the premise that people should be able to work in any firm they choose and still get help during the internship period that is so filled with angst. It only makes sense that our professional organization would fill that role.