

Blue Collar Design Theory: Promoting Community Health through a partnership Between an Art School and Academic Health Center or An Alternate Approach to Graphic Design Education that makes a Difference

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ABSTRACT

Seven years ago, the Maryland Institute College of Art began a partnership with the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health to develop creative public health information that would target the East Baltimore community.

MICA students have an opportunity to understand the power and limits of graphic design, and have to learn to communicate to an at-risk urban community and medical researchers. The partnership is creating a new model of service-learning with enormous potential for design/health partnerships across the country.

This paper will discuss how an art school, academic research institution and a disenfranchised community can work together.

Key Words: Partnership, Social Design And Interdisciplinary Education

I. INTRODUCTION

Graphic Design education has always been fraught with pedagogical dilemmas. These problems are, in part, due to the divide between student desires and instructors' project delivery. For example students seek a realistic and professional educational experience,

which are not only important to their education, but also necessary for acquiring the appropriate skill sets to enter the competitive work place. Graphic design instructors are faced with the complicated task of giving students both technical and theoretical skills in a discipline that needs to be segmented and structured. Therefore the educational experience has been through trial and error in the delivery of tried and tested ‘artificial’ projects with unrestricted parameters and unlimited time constraints. If instructors attempt to implement real-world projects they struggle with first finding an appropriate client and project, second a workable budget, and third a client committed to enriching the educational experience of the students. The result has been the implementation of various identity design projects because they fit neatly into the above concerns yet the professional benefits for students are weak at best because they don’t get experience in client management, access to a community and multiple delivery vehicles.

A studio course called the “MICA/JHU Design Coalition” has been developed at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) that meets the professional–practice desires of the students as well as addressing the pedagogical concerns of the instructor. The class also benefits from interdisciplinary education where MICA students work with Johns Hopkins School of Public Health (JHSPH) researchers and students in an at–risk urban community in East Baltimore.

It is hoped that this paper will illustrate how professional practice can be sustainable within the framework of education, and give educators an appropriate model to be implemented at their academic institutions. This paper will also address a new area of design education that partners with other academic institutions and community organizations.

2. EAST BALTIMORE OVERVIEW

East Baltimore is poverty–stricken, predominantly African American, urban neighborhood that begins a few miles from the MICA campus. The vast majority of MICA students have never experienced conditions like those existing in this community. This neighborhood has high infant mortality rates and disproportionately high syphilis and heroin indices. East Baltimore is a violent place to live, has a plethora of single parent homes, and high rates of unemployment. Less than half the children graduate from high school and one quarter of the households fall below the federal poverty level reflecting that one in three children live in poverty. In addition, the lead poisoning statistics in Baltimore City (much of which is concentrated in East Baltimore) have been consistently high for generations. The citizens are

prone to hypertension, obesity, and diabetes. Because the challenges of daily life within East Baltimore are so intense, people have difficulty prioritizing long-term health issues!

This statistical information determined that to best communicate with this hard-to-reach community, messages must be delivered in a clear manner decipherable by those with an average reading level of below the sixth grade.

2. Course History and Course Outline

The MICA/JHU Design Coalition is offered as an elective course every semester where enrollment is open to the entire student population. The graphic design department anticipated that this approach would allow students to self-select the course, reflecting their level of motivation in being involved and committed to the social aspect of the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course description. It was hoped that students in other majors would also enroll in the course because of the uncertainty that graphic design would always be the appropriate delivery vehicle when trying to assess the needs of the client and community. Students from other majors might also bring other methods of problem solving to the class and provide the course alternative project solutions. The hope was to always have a diverse student population and a socially responsible partnership between the three communities involved in the projects—viz: JHSPH, MICA and East Baltimore. A key asset of this course was the impact it made on students who could potentially get their work published. In fact students expressed the primary reason for taking the course was to engage with the client and interact with the community. Of course they still want to get their design solution accepted by both parties, but this is a secondary consideration.

The class initially focused on the East Baltimore community since this is where the majority of JHSPH research projects are carried out. In the Fall 2006 semester the graphic design department was contacted by a community organization in West Baltimore to see if we could assist them. The West Baltimore community organization is called Martha's Place and the reason what they contacted us was because they were aware of the successful projects we had completed in East Baltimore. This was interesting in many ways because it would broaden our reach into West Baltimore and Martha's Place was not having any JHSPH research conducted there.

On the first day of class, as students are introduced to the course, they are instructed on how to define design solutions in a realistic and effective way. Students are asked to understand the differences between client, community leaders and community who are the

target audience. The students must value building a crucial connection between the target audience and the project results, allowing community members to share in the programs success, in order to inspire an actual change of behavior, leading to an improvement in their quality of life. Despite diverse academic backgrounds, the students are encouraged to draw from their knowledge of the graphic design vocabulary and understanding of the industry-process and the complications involved in working with actual clients, real projects and target audiences.

Later that day, students meet with the clients who present their research projects and discuss their goals for disseminating results. After the clients' present, MICA students go on a walking tour of both East and West Baltimore communities. These walking tours are lead by Baltimore community leaders who are familiar with the community and its members. The walking tour strategy proved mutually beneficial, as the community awareness of the MICA/JHSPH/Martha's Place partnership increased and the students can demonstrate a tangible understanding of community life in East and West Baltimore.

It is important to note that the graphic design department pays the community leader for the services of the community tour. The graphic design department also recognized that the community should be involved at each stage of the process. Furthermore, the project should utilize the already existing community organizations as "community gateways" (discussed below) for testing possible design solutions and for disseminating information. For the second class, students are asked to research background information regarding the JHSPH presentations and the target audiences. The students then present their findings to the individual JHSPH research teams (on the fourth class) to ensure that the students' understanding of the nature of the project was in line with JHSPH goals. The students do not show creative strategies at this stage. This approach has proved beneficial to both JHSPH researchers and MICA students, and an effective example of how this student/client presentation works can be seen from one of the initial research projects for the DASH diet study that was carried out in the Fall 2001 semester.

The JHSPH team had researched dietary control of hypertension and named it "Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension–DASH Diet." MICA students addressed the potential confusion that could result from using the term "DASH" as the Baltimore Transit Authority was about to launch an advertising campaign and livery signage for the Downtown Area Shuttle (DASH). The students and the research team decided that the diet's name should be changed to avoid any confusion.

As a result of this second meeting, the instructor and the students devised a three-part strategy:

1. Concentrate on making the complicated research results easy to understand
2. Increase the self-esteem of the community
3. Promote positive aspects of the JHSPH

Within these strategies, it was recognized that the community should be involved at each stage of the process. Furthermore, the project should utilize the already existing community organizations as “community gateways” (discussed below) for testing possible design solutions and for disseminating information.

MICA course instructor provided guidance about design strategies, and how to target a design message to a specific audience. Impromptu community meetings were held in East Baltimore, and the JHSPH research teams coordinated planned focus groups.

Throughout the 16-week semester, JHSPH researchers and community leaders periodically presented to the class with the goal of further clarifying the research results, increasing sensitivity to the community, and responding to specific research-related questions. Specific presentations include: how to target the message to the appropriate reading level, effective use of language and cultural illustrations to an African American community, and the social-economic realities of the target community. The MICA course instructor provided guidance about design strategies, and how to target a design message to a specific audience. Impromptu community meetings were held in East and West Baltimore, and the JHSPH research teams coordinated planned focus groups in East Baltimore and Martha’s Place leaders arranged the same in West Baltimore.

3. COMMUNITY GATEWAYS AND SOCIAL DESIGN

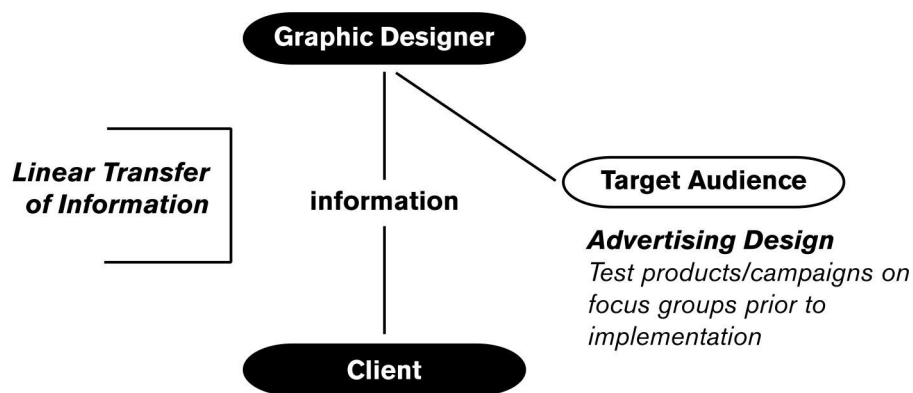
Early on, the JHSPH research teams explained that the East Baltimore community had built up resentment and hostility toward the Johns Hopkins community. This resentment has been built up over generations in part because the East Baltimore neighborhood surrounds the Johns Hopkins Medical University campus. The university is continually expanding and displacing East Baltimore residents as it expands into these neighborhoods. Another reason for resentment is because Johns Hopkins researchers have tested many of their research projects on the East Baltimore community residents and do not feel the need to inform the community of the findings after the research has been completed.

Recognizing that bridges must be built to connect the parties, or messages from the partnership would fall on deaf ears, a strategy to reach the East Baltimore community was developed. This became an essential focus of the partnership and was spearheaded by MICA in order to minimize the resistance. This additional goal was essential in implementing the primary goal of gaining acceptance of the health message within East Baltimore.

Community Gateways are defined as entities that have already earned the respect and trust of the community. MICA, with the assistance of JHSPH personnel, would build upon and strengthen these relationships. The Gateways would be engaged in focus groups and meetings to test potential design solutions and served as a resource to students seeking information about the community.

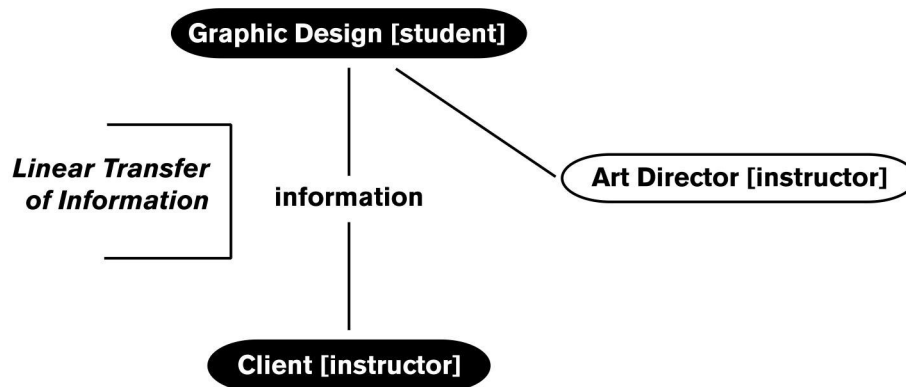
It was realized that a new strategy to graphic design education was needed for this course to allow students to both navigate and understand the complex relationships between community gateways and client. The normal paradigm of graphic design/client relationship (as shown in Fig. 1) did not apply to this course.

Fig. 1 GRAPHIC DESIGNER/CLIENT RELATIONSHIP



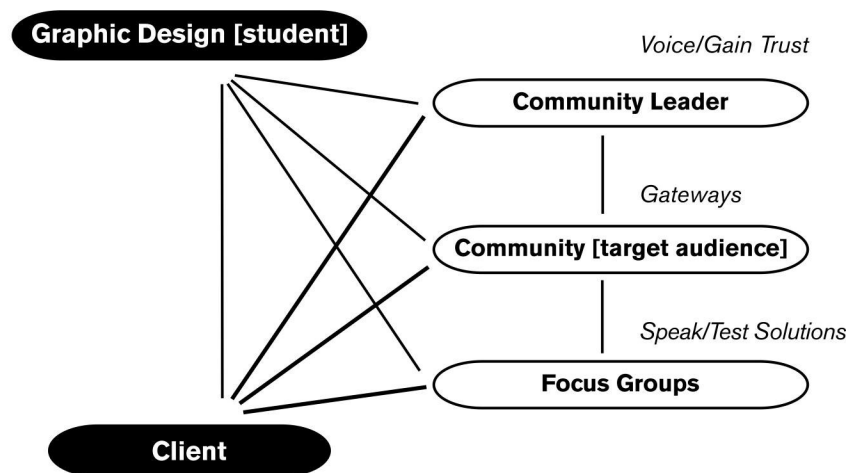
We can see the industrial relationship between the graphic designer and client in Figure 1. Information flows from one group to another through a series of meetings and presentations where mutual needs are met to implement the project. The graphic designer responds to the clients needs and establishes the appropriate visual language and delivery vehicles. In some graphic design companies, and in most advertising agencies, project strategies are tested, prior to implementation, on a specific audience. It is important to note that even when the project is tested on this group, information still primarily flows between client and designer.

Fig. 2 GRAPHIC DESIGN EDUCATION



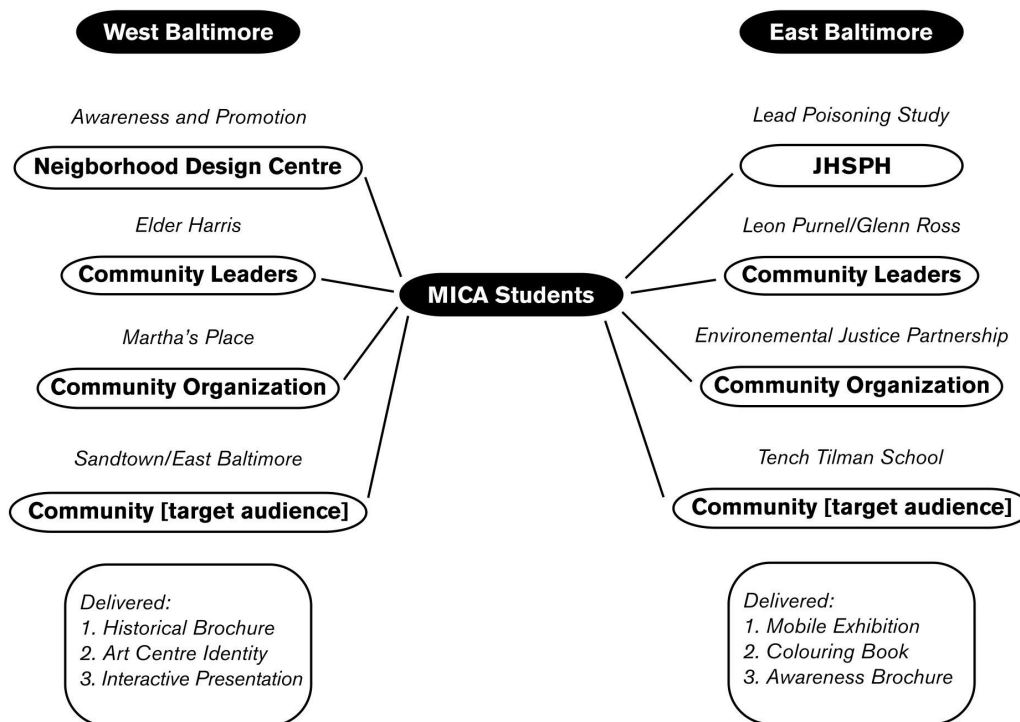
This framework has become the accepted model of graphic design education where the instructor acts as client and student as designer. The graphic design instructor switches between client and art director. The informational process is linear between student and instructor and the projects are mainly theoretical and based either upon pedagogical needs or instructors experience.

Fig. 3 GRAPHIC (SOCIAL) DESIGN/CLIENT THEORETICAL RELATIONSHIP



This figure demonstrates the initial graphic design, client and community relationships. It was thought that this framework would allow students to respond to client and community needs by placing themselves between both communities. The matrix becomes far more complicated where information not only passes from client to graphic designer (student and instructor), but also from graphic designer to community leader (who intern acts as the gateway to the community), and community leader to client. The graphic designer has to acquire social net worker skills as well as act as a mediator and designer.

Fig. 4 GRAPHIC (SOCIAL) DESIGN/CLIENT PRAGMATIC RELATIONSHIP



This final figure shows the position of the graphic design student in an actual project where they are placed in the middle of the client and community. This framework is complex where information passes between three major constituents. There are two different projects at different locations in Baltimore. Students acquire important communication and problem-solving skills when they interact with these constituents. These skills are essential in the development of the students' educational experience and industrial practice.

It is clear that there is a desire and need for designers to become involved in social responsive work and the MICA/JHSPH Coalition course addresses both the social and pragmatic areas of design education. Students are instructed on how to use their skills to better society and to learn how to deal with both clients and community in a constructive and creative way.

4. CASE STUDIES

Below are two case studies highlighted to define the MICA/JHSPH Design Coalition experience.

During the first course, the students' focused on two different projects one of which was the DASH Diet. In the Fall 2006 semester students worked on three different projects one of which was Martha's Place.

I. Dietary Approach to Stop Hypertension-DASH Diet Study

2. Martha's Place

A. DASH DIET

The partnership selected the Middle East Community Organization (MECO) as the primary Gateway for the DASH Diet Study, JHSPH researchers met with community leaders, prior to the class's first meeting with the community organizations, to ensure acceptance of the program and a smooth transition between the JHSPH research teams and the MICA class. MICA students would then interact with this focus group to obtain acceptance of their design approach as well as MICA's acceptance into the community. Students met with at MECO on the fourth class where they asked participants to read through information that explaining the importance and implementation of the DASH diet. The information, edited by JHSPH researchers, contained a brief explanation of the diet's goals and a series of menus that could be adopted. The reading session lasted for thirty minutes after which, a series of conversation topics were explored. JHSPH researchers made sure that community participants attended the focus group meeting who knew about hypertension through their own experience or the experiences of a family member or friend. The JHSPH researches did not attend the actual focus group meeting so that an unrestrained and candid discussion could take place between MICA students and East Baltimore community. The group's ages were between 35 and 70 years and were split evenly between male and female.

Specific questions addressed the name of the diet, the experience of following the regime, and the importance of dealing with hypertension in relation to other problems that they faced.

The MECO focus group results revealed that participants:

1. Did not identify with DASH name because the name was too obscure
2. Found the use of name 'diet' to be too confrontational and negative
3. Found information difficult to understand and therefore apply to their lives
4. Found that suggested meals were expensive
5. Found that many of the meals were difficult to purchase and prepare
6. Considered that suggested menus were not culturally appropriate for the African American diet
7. Resisted changing their current meal plans
8. Did not like the food groups offered in the supplementary material
9. Distrusted Johns Hopkins

CREATIVE PROCESS

The students determined that they needed to change the name of the diet and produce a new image to make the diet more appealing to the target audience.

Supported by both student research and the focus group information, the name was changed, and various typographic treatments and colors were applied. These images were tested in both the JHSPH team and the community focus group. To encourage community ownership and ideals of partnership, the community was asked to take an active role in the selection of the identity.

The students presented the following names as alternatives to the DASH diet:

1. NO-HYPE
2. FRESH GROOVE
3. NUMBERS
4. ALIVE

RESULTS

The focus group felt that “No-Hype”, although alluding to “no hypertension,” was both negative and confusing. Drug dealers and addicts in East Baltimore referred to hypodermic needles using the term “hype”. The community rejected the Numbers and Alive solutions because they did not clearly identify the desired outcomes of the diet. Both groups (JHSPH and community groups) overwhelmingly selected “Fresh Groove” as the most effective name. “Fresh Groove” reflected the fresh nature of the food groups, and groove reflected the importance of following the daily/weekly schedule. Groove was a familiar term to the community, conveying fun, music, and dance.

CAMPAIGNS

The last stage in the development of “Fresh Groove” was the production of an awareness campaign for the name and the food groups. Several students went on the diet for two weeks to better understand the experience. These students exclusively purchased food from stores in the East Baltimore community, and either walked or used public transportation from East Baltimore on their shopping trips, to gain an understanding of the dieter’s experience. These students found it difficult to obtain fresh food in the East Baltimore community and also found that following the daily intake allowances resulted in hunger between meals. The students were concerned that certain members of the target audience who might be engaged in physical labor would need larger portions. Students were also concerned that if adding extra portions would affect the health of the community. JHSPH researchers instructed students that eating extra portions would not cause any harm to the

community. They also instructed students that the primary message of the campaigns should be to eat healthily.

RESULTS

Six students presented at MECO to both JHSPH researchers and to the focus group.

Both groups were asked to select the most effective strategy for implementation.

The selected campaign was a series of colored numbers, placed within circular fields, with Fresh Groove applied on promotional posters, T-Shirts and advertisements that would be available for distribution throughout the community. The numbers were color coded to represent specific food groups, and the numbers reflected the recommended daily servings.

The circular fields and numbers were as follows:

- 8. Brown = Grains
- 5. Green = Vegetables
- 5. Orange = Fruits
- 2. Red = Protein
- 2. White = Dairy

The series of posters contained one or all of the numbers with a brief explanation of the food group, the serving amount, and the importance of healthy eating to prevent hypertension. An African American cookbook was produced which contained recipes using the foods promoted by the diet. The cookbook listed the locations within East Baltimore where the community could purchase reasonably priced food that complied with the diet and readers were directed to the food bank at The Men's Center.

B. MARTHA'S PLACE

Prior to the start of the fall 2006 semester the MICA graphic design department was contacted by the Neighborhood Design Coalition (NDC) to see if we were interested in partnering with them. NDC is a non-profit organization that provides a variety of design services to community organizations throughout the state of Maryland. They had heard of the community work that the MICA/JHU Design Coalition classes had been providing to various East Baltimore community organizations and felt that we could provide design expertise to many of their clients. One of their clients who needed assistance was located in West Baltimore and was called Martha's Place. Martha's Place is a community organization who provides rehabilitation services for West Baltimore women who are addicted to drugs. It offers a six-month residential program that provides structure, counseling, and trains to teach clients how to maintain sobriety and establish independent living. We met with Martha's Place founder Elder C. W. Harris on the first day of class and he took us on a community tour of the Sandtown area of West Baltimore where Martha's Place is located.

After the community tour Elder Harris discussed possible collaborative projects between MICA and Martha's Place in their Boardroom. A representative from NDC was at hand to inform us how to connect with other NDC Design partners and to also record what projects MICA would agree to commit to. Martha's Place had recently purchased a property across the street that they were interesting in converting to a community art center. They also interested in MICA could assist in the creation of a mural wall and reflective area along the side of another of their properties that would help memorialize the people in the community who have lost their lives to drug addiction. We were interested in working with Martha's Place because they were located in West Baltimore and were not funded by JHSPH research grants. We agreed that we could assist them on both these projects and funding would be provided by community grants aided by NDC personnel. Two MICA graphic design students Minou Sinios and Oliver Munday were interested in providing Martha's Place with a third and unfunded project that they felt was essential. Both Oliver and Minou were interested in the fact that Elder Harris' presentation about the history of Sandtown and how it related to the creation of Martha's Place was verbal only, They felt that by providing Martha's Place with a printed record of the community history and relate it to Elder Harris' dreams for the future then this document would record community history as well as promote Martha's Place to potential investors. Oliver and Minou met with Elder Harris on the second week of class to listen to their design proposal. He agreed to support them in whatever way he could and would try and obtain financial support.

For the next sixteen weeks both students attended morning worship services at Martha's Place and interviewed community members as well as Martha's Place volunteers and residents. They took photographs as well as obtaining historical photographs from historical associations and community residents. They wrote to local politicians and business leaders to see if anyone would offer financial support in the production of the publication as well as having weekly design meetings with the instructor and Elder Harris.

We decided that we needed to have the future inspirational component of the publication produced in collaboration with West Baltimore school children. The strategy was to ask students at the New Song Academy what they thought their neighborhood should look like. We took photographs to class for the students to look at and then asked them to draw how they would see it.

By week sixteen they had finalized a sixty-eight page two-color photo essay that was printed three weeks later. 200 copies were handed to Elder Harris who distributed them to all

Martha's Place resident's volunteers as well as people in the Sandtown community of West Baltimore. Elder Harris informed us two weeks later that a group of investors came from New York and for the first time people walked away with a clear idea of what Martha's Place could offer. He also informed us it was the first time that anyone had walked away with something from Martha's Place.

5. CONCLUSION

It is clear that there is a need for graphic design students to become involved in socially responsive work because it broadens both their education and their understanding of complex partnerships. The MICA/JHU Design Coalition addresses both the social and pragmatic areas of design education. Students are instructed on how to use their skills to better society and to learn how to deal with both clients and community in a constructive and creative way.

It was initially thought that students would learn more about the relationship between graphic designer and client, and understand the dynamics of the community. In fact students have expressed that they find out more about themselves from the community and client. The class becomes a reflective journey as the student questions inequality in an inner city community. Many students have taken the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course two, three, and four times with some students deciding to seek employment with studios who focus on social issues. Some students' are employed in medical publication departments, and some are enrolled in socially-related PhD programs. Many companies have contacted the graphic design department expressing the reason they employed MICA students was, in part, because of the work produced and experience gained in the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course.

The development of the MICA/JHU Design Coalition course and partnership with JHSPH and East Baltimore community has created educational and social benefits. MICA has developed strong links with both JHSPH and the East Baltimore community. More importantly, the East Baltimore community has now increased their exposure to the significant research carried out at the JHSPH that will positively impact their lives. This partnership has also helped to dispel the many negative myths associated with the institution. The JHSPH faculty and staff have provided services and assistance that have proved crucial to the course development. They have also helped to create Community

Gateways and provide future research projects.

The Fresh Groove campaign was withheld until funding can be obtained for mass production. After the first year of the program we identified several areas for improvement. The JHSPH groups did not budget for print costs, an oversight problematic to both students and the community as a whole. The students felt disillusioned because they believed that one of the reasons for taking the course was the possibility of getting work printed. Also by not printing the campaign JHSPH inadvertently alienated the community that participated in the development process who never saw the results of their efforts. This added to the discord between Johns Hopkins and the East Baltimore community. This experience taught us to either budget for print production in the initial grant proposal or ensure that the necessary funds are available prior to engaging the partnership in subsequent efforts.

Since the development of this new partnership, the Maryland Institute College of Art's graphic design program has been inundated with requests from the East Baltimore community to produce graphic design projects. The MICA/JHU Design Coalition has produced design solutions for Type Two Diabetes, Child Injuries Through Gun Violence, Infant Lead Poisoning, Kidney Donation and a Mobile Safety Center (CareS), research projects that have all been implemented. MICA has recently developed an eighteen-month course called "Super Pride" that began in Spring 2005. This institutionalized course will establish partners with other academic institutions, (the Baltimore Contemporary Museum, Baltimore City Planning Department, and many other private companies) who will provide both financial and professional support to allow for larger community concerns, such as refurbishing buildings and providing employment opportunities.

The Martha's Place publication continues to promote the dreams and aspirations of the West Baltimore community and we are currently developing a second edition. We also completed the art center and mural projects as well. The art center is called the Jubilee Art Center and students produced both design proposals for interior plans as well as interior and exterior graphic treatments. The construction will begin in 2008. The mural is currently underway and will be completed in the end of this summer. After that the reflective area construction will begin.

There continues to be a commitment to strengthen the partnership between MICA, JHSPH, and the East Baltimore community and to see this partnership as a positive model embraced by other academic institutions to improve community well being.

6. ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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7. FOOTNOTES

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<http://www.jhsph.edu/adolescenthealth/Research/Sexual%20and%20Reproductive%20Health/Pilot%20HIV%20Risk>