

# Who they become is as important as what they know

We must teach students to become agents for change so they can bring design thinking to causes they care about.



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## Introduction

Traditionally, design education focuses on what students know and which skills they acquire. This preparation launches them into predictable roles in well-defined fields. The catch is that such stability is no longer present in today's economy.

As custodians of our disciplines, we are more likely to teach software and history and aesthetics, while neglecting the struggle with identity and values that is inevitable during the formative years of young adulthood. To prepare students for a fast-changing global economy, schools must help students learn about themselves, understand their world, and feel empowered to identify and tackle social problems in innovative ways.

I will show examples of student work from the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design (MIAD) that illustrate how students:

- Engage with the community,
- Explore the question of identity,
- Discover what they care about,
- Take ownership of their learning, and
- Use design to address social issues.

## Engage with the community

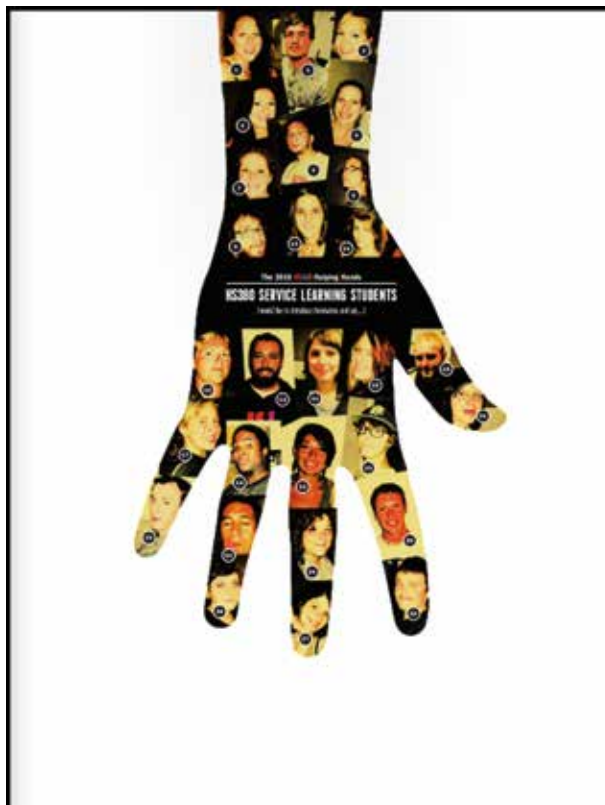
At the Milwaukee Institute of Art and Design all students are required to participate in its Service Learning program. This combines 35 hours of community service with reading and reflective writing assignments.



"Just Pointing Out" that 980 is the total number of volunteer hours in one semester at MIAD. (Paul Altott)

When MIAD was added to President Obama's Honor Roll for Higher Education Community Service, the school was praised for its commitment to help students realize their creative potential. According to the reviewers, an education developing creative potential must include active citizenship, community participation, and a direct engagement with societal challenges. The educational program should foster the core values of passion, commitment, dedication, lifelong learning, critical thinking, and problem solving.\*

\*<http://www.miad.edu/newsroom/news/197-general-news-category/1466-miad-named-to-presidents-honor-roll>



Images of some of the students in the Service Learning course at MIAD. (Paul Altott)

The school partners with over 90 community groups in places like Neighborhood House, working with at risk youth,



"Experiencing Neighborhood House," joy in volunteering. (Juan Hernandez)

Habitat for Humanity, building homes for low-income families.



MIAD student Chad Dodd helps his community building homes with Habitat for Humanity. (Kristen Palzkill)

or La Causa Crisis Nursery.



After traveling to Kampala, Uganda, to teach art workshops, Benno Rothschild returned to Milwaukee to teach at-risk children and work at La Causa Crisis Nursery. (Said Guerra)

The students write journals and essays about their experience. The defining paper required of each student is called "This I Believe." In that piece, students are called upon to examine and define their values. In the process they reveal their questions, optimism, and idealism. "I realize that I can be very small, but can be very great...This is what I believe builds a strong community: time, love, respect, and friendship." (Jackie Berndt)



"I believe I am very small, but can be very great." from "This I Believe" essay (Jackie Berndt)

"Will I make a difference? I have high hopes for our future. I hope everyone can drop their weapons and prejudices in order to solve the mountain of problems we are facing. Simply love." (Andrew Palios)



"Will I make a difference? I have high hopes for our future." (Andrew Palios)

### Explore the question of identity

Grappling with a belief system is one aspect of the character evolution that creates activists. Young people pursuing higher education are exposed to new ideas and asked to think critically about their world. In that context they become aware of their identity by examining their life experiences and cultural roots.



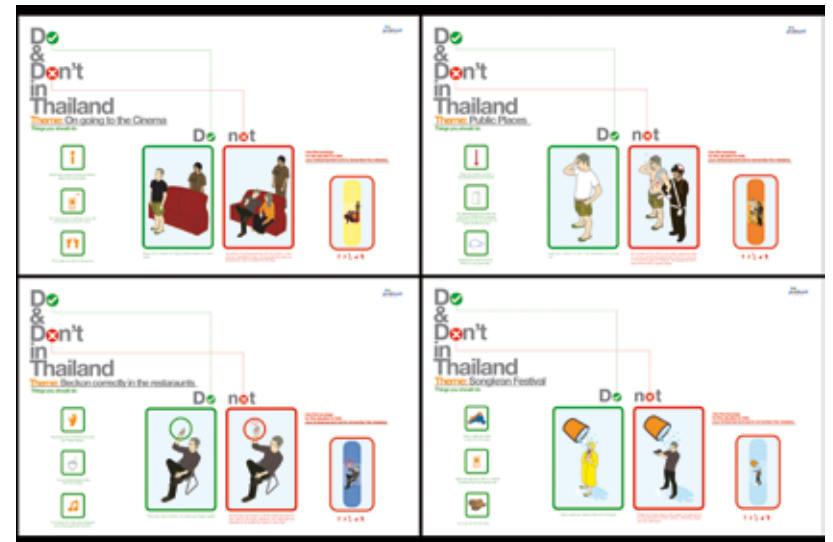
Embroidered Hmong story quilt. (Hua Moua and Christina Vang)

Hua Moua and Christina Vang designed story quilts, folk tales, books, and puppets, to communicate about the Hmong culture to a population that knew little about this group's rich traditions and troubled history in Laos, Vietnam, and China. In the process they grew closer to their families and roots. Knowing “who you are” is a platform for evolving into “who you will become,” “what you will stand for,” and “how you will act.”



Hua Moua presents her interpretations of Hmong folk tales to her father. (Hua Moua and Christina Vang)

This student wanted to change the disrespectful behavior of foreign visitors to his country who could be unwittingly rude to their hosts. He developed a kit of materials to be distributed on international flights that educated visitors about acceptable behavior and social norms, such as standing in all settings when the national anthem is played.



Information graphics that describe inappropriate behavior in Thailand. (Bowling)

### Discover what they care about

Having learned about themselves, their culture and their values, students need an opportunity to discover and express what they care about.

Jason Rothman used large-scale posters to highlight the pitfalls of cell phone use in public places.



These posters warn that people lose awareness of their surroundings when they use their smart phones. (Jason Rothman)

In order to make meaningful social change that went beyond those visual messages, he designed a mobile phone app, “iDisconnect,” that recorded if the phone was used while driving. It combined GPS and movement recording technology to report the information to auto insurers. Drivers then received insurance policy cost reductions if the phone was not used in transit.



iDisconnect is a mobile phone app that records when a smart phone is in use while driving and reports to the automobile insurer. (Jason Rothman)

Environmental Issues are a huge concern of young people everywhere who are seeing the dramatic effects wrought by changes in our environment—whether it is:

The effect of air pollution on children,



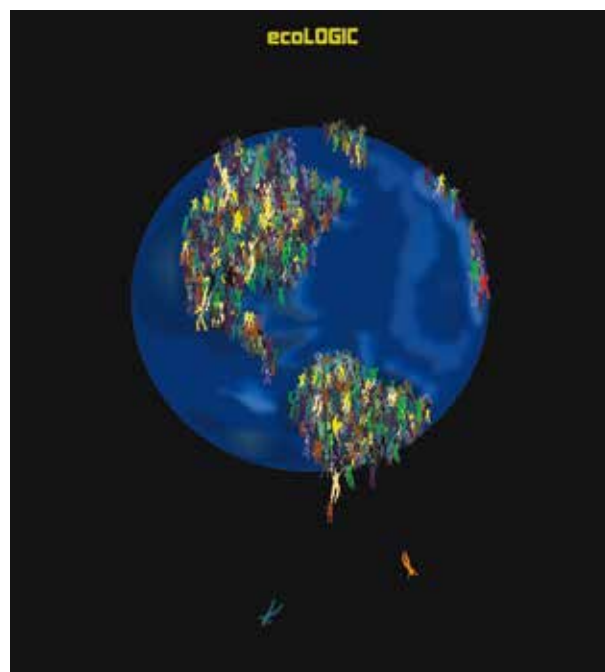
Air pollution threatens future generations. (April Walczak)

Or destructive oil drilling practices that fuel our insatiable appetite for fuel,



Our planet is being destroyed to produce oil. (Nate Pyper)

Or overpopulation,



The earth's natural resources will not accommodate its burgeoning population in the future. (Radostina Joy Stiff)

Or, the effect of medicines that have invaded fresh water sources.



We are finding dangerous levels of pharmaceuticals in fish and fresh water as a result of drug contamination. (Anne Lingenfelter)

Anne Lingenfelter combined a large format book and an installation of information graphics to warn about the danger of pharmaceuticals that have leached into our drinking water. In the process she became an evangelist about wastewater issues.

### Take Ownership of their Learning

Water and environmental issues are often concerns that motivate our students. This could be surprising given our location on Lake Michigan, one of the Great Lakes — the largest body of fresh water on earth.



The Great Lakes are the largest body of fresh water in the world. The cities of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and Tzintzingareo, Mexico are identified with red stars. (Anne Ghory-Goodman)

From the time an issue captures a student's mind and heart, the motivation to use design skills to solve social problems translates quickly into ownership of the learning process.

To watch this process of independent investigation unfold, let's follow a small team of students who realized that to design a response to global water issues they needed to do primary research at the source of the problems. They wanted to discover whether there were local solutions to local problems—ones not imposed by North Americans from a privileged and water-rich city.



The Aqua Independence Project team was composed of Juan Hernandez, Desiree May, Scott Bednar, and Xavier Ruffin. (Anne Ghory-Goodman)

They became known as, “The Mexico Team,” creators of the Aqua Independence Project.

Juan Hernandez was the team leader. He had grown up in the small Mexican town of Tzintzingareo where there had been no running water when he was a child. He shared with teammates Desiree May, Scott Bednar, and Xavier Ruffin the belief that if you...

“Give a man a fish; you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish; you feed him for a lifetime.” (Lao Tzu)

Motivated by the need to find answers, they took ownership of their learning. I would find them doing research before the 8am class began. They barely looked up when I came in.



7:55 am. Teams were already at work conducting collaborative research. (Anne Ghory-Goodman)

I was a resource, one among many, that included books, websites, experts, and museums.



Teams sought out external resources like Milwaukee's Discovery World Museum that houses interactive science and technology exhibits and fresh and saltwater aquariums. (Anne Ghory-Goodman)

They concluded that the most effective way to understand the needs in Tzintzingareo was to visit, observe, and interact. They sold hotdogs and cupcakes, applied for passports, and told their teachers that they were going to Mexico to do field work for a class assignment.

They made a short video of that trip and what they learned. Here's a link to their 4 minute movie on YouTube:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yICvXW4APsM>



Video created by the Aqua Independence Project about their water research in Tzintzingareo, Mexico.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yICvXW4APsM>

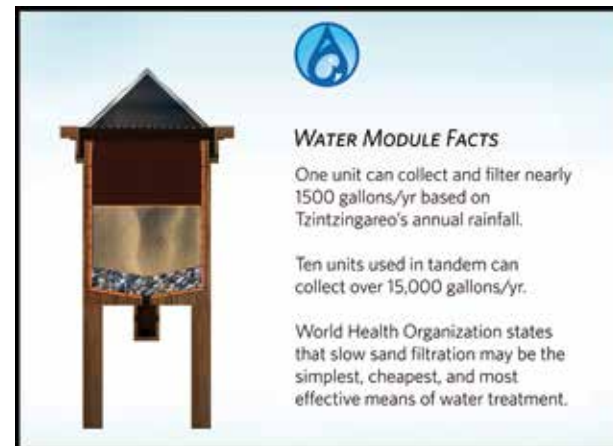
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The team learned that the town's current water department was run by 2 volunteers who needed funds to repair the unreliable pumps and pay for the electricity to run them. But, while most residents routinely paid monthly electric, cell phone, internet and TV bills, they refused to pay \$7 a month for water. They believed that water should be free.





Scott Bednar also designed a water-harvesting module using slow filtration purification. This unit could be used in areas not yet part of the town water system. Water harvesting can also supply water for activities like feeding livestock or manufacturing terra cotta tiles and bricks that don't require treated water.



This water harvesting module uses slow sand filtration and can collect nearly 1500 gallons of water a year. (Scott Bednar)



Scott later designed and built an interactive exhibit to educate Americans about global water issues based on what he had learned in Tzintzingareo.



"Why Water?" (an interactive, informational, and multi-media exhibit built to educate the public about global water issues) (Scott Bednar)

Poster series to raise awareness in Tzintzingareo, Mexico, about the connection between water bill payment and sustainable access to water. (Aqua Independence Project)

The town was divided into zones that received water one day a week for 4-6 hours to be stored in tanks at each home. There was no way to turn off the water to individual delinquent citizens without the entire neighborhood being penalized.

The Aqua Independence team created a poster series to educate the public about the connection between funding and sustainable access to water. They realized that installing water meters in homes would enable the water department to turn off the water to individual families, so that for the first time there would be demonstrable consequences for non-payment.



When he returned from Mexico, Xavier Ruffin built an interactive touch screen display unit to engage and educate museum visitors about world water problems. Again, he sought out people and resources to acquire the knowledge he needed to deliver information in this new format. He, and the rest of the team, continued to learn independently, to care, and to share.



Interactive touch screen display created to engage children concerning water problems using Tzintzingareo as a case study. (Xavier Ruffin).

### Use design to address social issues

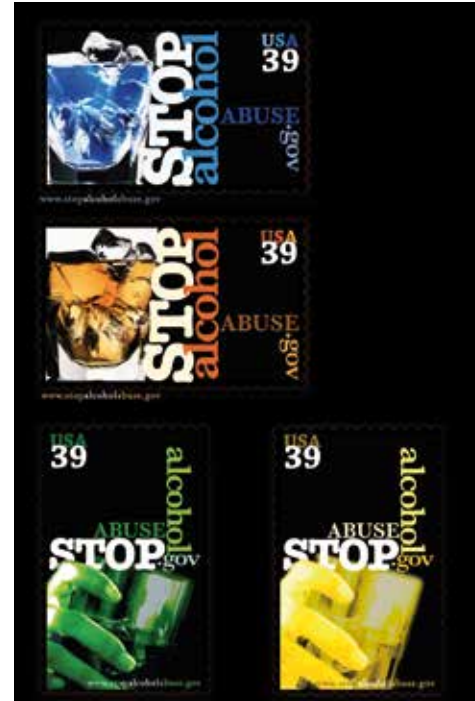
The diverse topics that are born of student passion bring a rich mix of interests to the classroom. They also demonstrate how designers must develop critical skills to research and define pressing issues before responding via a range of media. There are many examples:

Three-dimensional posters about genetically modified foods,



Kinetic three-dimensional posters provide provocative messages about genetically modified foods. (Nova Askue)

Postage stamps designed to call for an end to alcohol abuse,



The designer proposed using postage stamps for this public service message about alcohol abuse in order to communicate to multiple audiences in diverse locations.

Websites about political injustice,



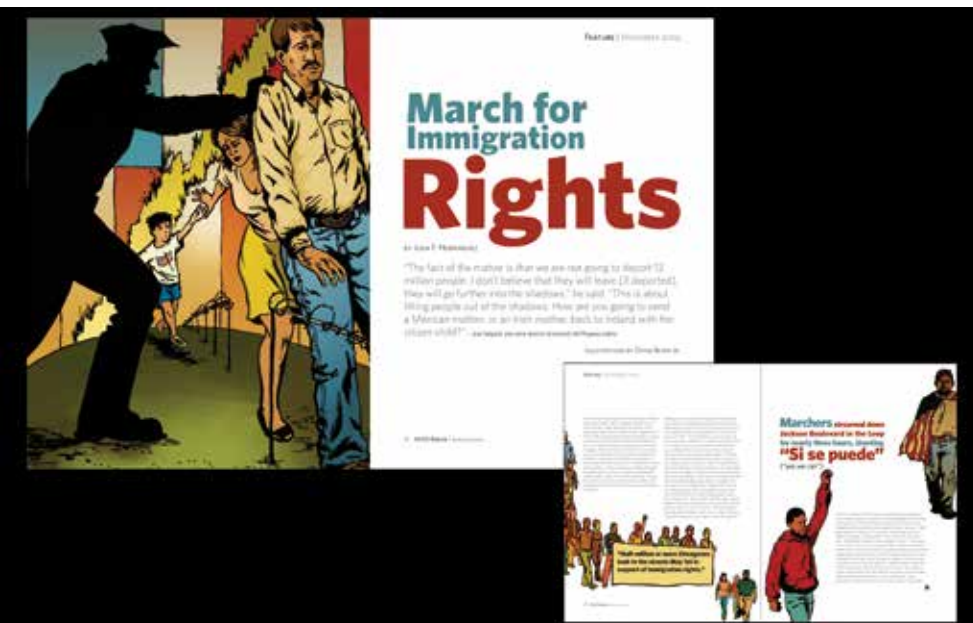
The Free Iran website could reach a global audience. (Siyavash Motamedi)

## Guerilla campaigns about topical issues



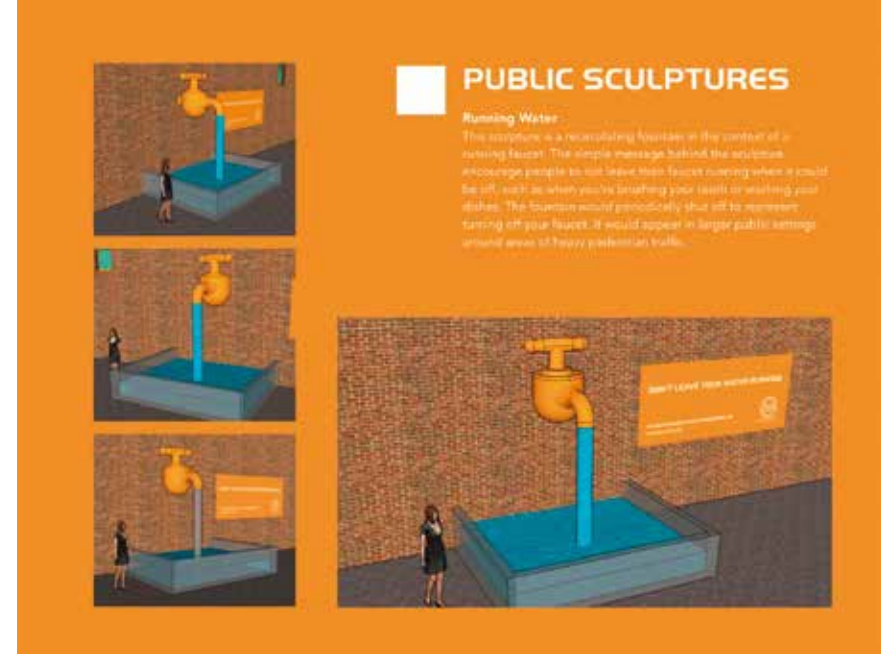
The Blind Dove project used a web site, three-dimensional information graphics, and a guerilla flash mob to call attention to the inequality between U.S. government spending on education and US government aid to Israel. (Fadwa Abulughod)

Articles about immigration rights,



Students wrote, illustrated, and designed publications about causes they believed in, like immigration rights. (Juan Hernandez)

Environmental installations in public places—like this enormous faucet to highlight the need for water conservation,



## PUBLIC SCULPTURES

### Running Water

This sculpture is a recirculating fountain in the context of a running faucet. The simple message behind the sculpture encourage people to not leave their faucet running when it could be off, such as when you're brushing your teeth or washing your dishes. The fountain would periodically shut off to represent turning off your faucet. It would appear in larger public settings around areas of heavy pedestrian traffic.

The Blue Side team proposed a large-scale installation of a continually running water faucet using re-circulating water to draw attention to the need for water conservation. (Punyaruk Baingern, Panchalee Phungsoondara, Emery Ullenberg and Maxx Valenti)

Games for role playing and peer interaction to deter gang membership,



Games are used with Middle School students to encourage role-playing with the intention of teaching strategies to resist gang pressure. (Andrew Palios)

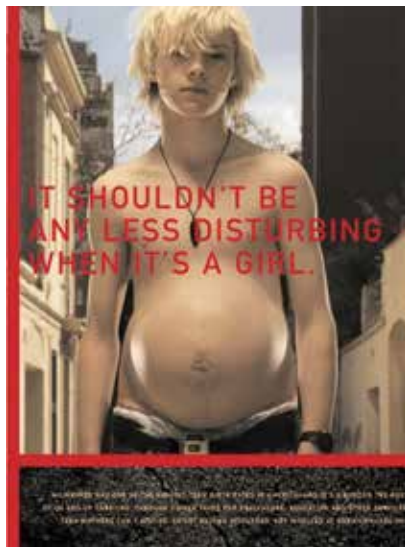
Music video and motion graphics sharing advice for students living without mentors and role models. (“Koolness” is a 2.5-minute video that demonstrates how a designer can use newly acquired 3D modeling, animation, and video editing skills to tackle a social issue.)



<http://vimeo.com/11119443>

“Koolness” is a 2.5-minute music video trailer that combines live action video and motion graphics to communicate with at risk students. (Xavier Ruffin)

An outdoor and print campaign to bring attention to the problem of teen pregnancy. The images of pregnant boys were seen on busses and billboards and in outdoor venues. MIAD grad Giho Lee art directed the campaign through the BVK agency, known for its branch called SERVE, that completes pro bono work for the community.



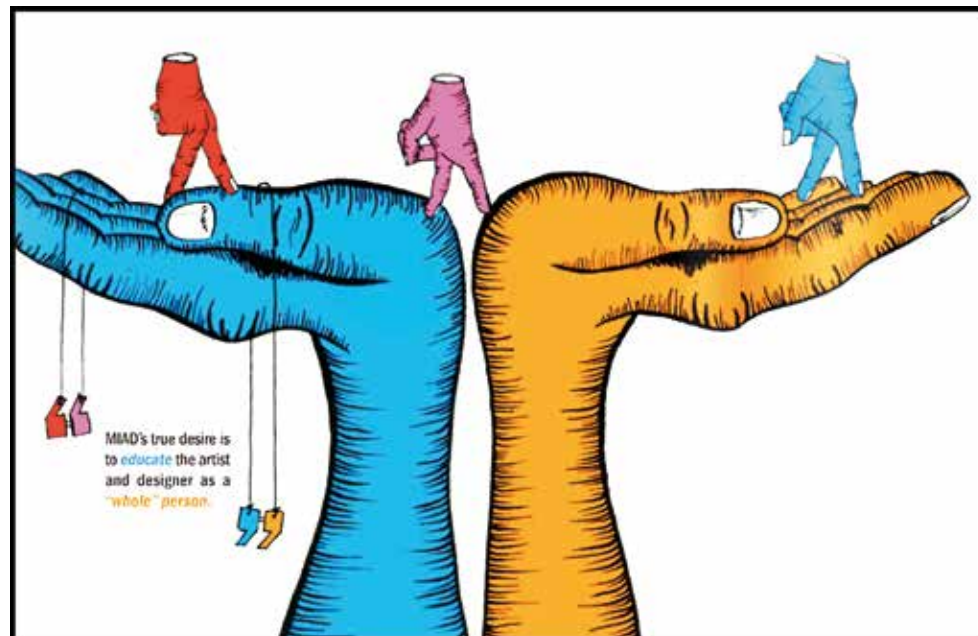
This is one of a series of posters displayed on billboards and in bus shelters that were designed to bring attention to problems resulting from teen pregnancies. (Giho Lee).

## Conclusion

Educators have an opportunity to tune in to the search for identity and values of young people pursuing higher education. When students take ownership of an issue it motivates learning. If students want to communicate in new ways, or bring new solutions to social problems, they will see the value of working hard through all stages of the learning process. This can evolve into a shared interest in determining how to address social problems, students develop a passion for implementing unique solutions that are the result of design thinking, interdisciplinary practice, and global awareness. Who they become is now linked to what they know

There are many terms for this approach: social design, design for the greater good, values driven design, sustainable practice, etc. We empower students to work for the causes they care about. When they are committed to the outcome, they see the reason for learning. In fact, they take ownership of their learning, because they understand its purpose.

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MIAD's true desire is to educate the artist and designer as a “whole” person. (Paul Altott)