LESS, BUT BETTER
ESSENTIALISM AND INDUSTRIAL DESIGN EDUCATION

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COVID-19 is just the latest crisis to affect Industrial Design education. Tuition rates, student debt, and enrollment numbers have plagued higher education for decades, and these issues are expected to continue for the foreseeable future. COVID-19, however, poses unique challenges that are stress-testing our ability to adapt. The pandemic led to a national discussion about who and what are truly essential? Doctors, nurses, first responders, and grocery store workers were celebrated and seen as necessary to society, while retail, travel, and entertainment employees filed for unemployment. In academia, we face a similar situation as distance-learning is leading to budget shortfalls. Cuts are being made and Industrial Design education is not immune to the fallout. We too are being asked to determine who and what are essential to our programs. These crucial decisions can often be viewed as subjective to those outside of the process. This paper applies framework from Greg McKeown's book Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less to the activities of the Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation. The result is paired-down programming with renewed focus on the Institute's mission, core values, objectives, and essential intent.

Keywords: COVID-19, essentialism, strategic plan

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education was in crisis before COVID-19. It just accelerated the reckoning. Tuition rates, student debt, and enrollment numbers have troubled academia for decades. COVID-19, however, poses unique challenges such as distance learning, budget cuts, and extreme financial hardship for students and universities alike. This pandemic is particularly frustrating because of the ambiguity surrounding whether or not universities will return to in-person education in the fall 2020 or spring 2021 semesters.

Distance learning and budget deficits are forcing us reconsider what employees, equipment, supplies, and activities are essential to Industrial Design education. Faculty and administrators can understandably become attached to their facilities, their colleagues, and the interpersonal feedback they get from in-person teaching. Deciding what, and who, stays or goes can truly be heartbreaking.

This paper documents an ongoing case study at the Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation (RIDI) at Western Michigan University (WMU). The Institute utilized framework from Greg McKeown's book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* as a way of exploring and evaluating the essential elements of its Product Design program, eliminating the nonessential elements, and implementing a "less, but more" system to guide future decisions. The result is a potentially replicable plan to assist other ID programs with reinventing themselves into programs that are leaner, more flexible, and better prepared to train students for careers in design.

2. THREATS TO HIGHER EDUCATION

For decades, the primary threat to higher education was that state governments have continually defunded public education. As of 2017, state and federal governments funded only 34% of public universities' total budgets (Urahn and Irwin, 2019). This has led to a substantial increase in tuition cost. From 1987-2018, the cost of an undergraduate education rose 213% at public schools and 129% at private schools (Hoffower, 2019) leading to average student debt of $29,900 in the 2019 graduating class ("A Look at the Shocking", 2020). There is currently $1.56 trillion of student debt in the United States (Freidman, 2020). These statistics make prospective students rightfully question the value of an undergraduate degree.

Today, COVID-19 is understandably seen as the most existential threat to higher education. Distance learning has challenged universities' abilities to adapt, and students are not pleased with the results. The American Council on Education predicts that 15% of students will not enroll in the fall if classes are entirely online (Hartocollis, 2020). International student enrollment, which is important to the overall budget because they tend to pay full tuition, is expected to drop by 25% (Hartocollis). Universities also rely on room and board as well as other student fees to balance the budget. These are not collected during distance learning and the expected revenue loss is catastrophic. For example, the University of Michigan is projecting a $400 million - $1 billion deficit for the 2020-2021 fiscal year (Kozlowski, 2020). Universities have responded with compensation cuts, layoffs, and increased workload for administration, faculty and staff.

There are also expected challenges for higher education in the future. For example, economist Nathan Grawe predicts a drop of 15% of college-ready students between 2025-2029 due to decreased birthrate during the Great Recession of 2007-2009 (Barshay, 2018). There is also growing partisan divide regarding the value of higher education. 59% of Republicans believe colleges have a negative effect on this country. While only 18% of Democrats agree, that still means that 38% of Americans believe that higher education is detrimental to the wellbeing of the country (Parker, 2019).

Even though the focus is currently on COVID-19, it would be a mistake to consider the crisis in higher education a temporary one. These issues will not end with a Coronavirus vaccine. Instead, this will be an ongoing battle that requires higher education to be proactive instead of reactive, focused in strategy, and ruthless in weeding out inefficiencies. The crisis in higher education is what designers call a "wicked problem," but perhaps Deloitte's term, "wicked opportunities," is more appropriate (Muoio, 2015). This crisis should not just be seen as a problem, but as an opportunity for systemic change.

3. CASE STUDY // RICHMOND INSTITUTE FOR DESIGN + INNOVATION

Western Michigan University is projecting a $45-85 million deficit in the 2020-2021 fiscal year (Davis, 2020) due to lost revenue due to COVID-19. A proportionate amount of that deficit falls to the College of Fine Arts, where the Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation (RIDI) is located. RIDI is in its third year of operation, currently offers a 4-year BFA in Product Design, and in fall 2020 will begin offering interdisciplinary courses that bring together students from across the University to work on projects through the lens of design.

The Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation utilized a framework from Greg McKeown's book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less* to proactively prepare for these upcoming budget cuts.

McKeown's framework is meant to give people or companies a more disciplined approach to the tasks they perform by identifying and emphasizing tasks that are essential and eliminating tasks that are nonessential.

The framework is a 3-step process. The first step is "explore and evaluate", where you gain a better understanding of all of the tasks performed, weigh them against your vision/mission statement, core values, essential intent, or quarterly objectives, and determine which tasks are essential and which are nonessential. The second is "eliminate", where you resolve to discontinue all activities that are nonessential or incongruent to your organization's "essential intent." The third is "execute", where you systematically implement procedures to keep your organization on track.

3.1 STEP 1 - EXPLORE AND EVALUATE
Objectively deciding what is essential and what is nonessential can be difficult for many reasons. First, most every task is relevant in some way, contributing to the overall student experience. It's also easy to assume that just because something has "always been done that way" it has to stay that way. This is certainly not the case. Another reason these decisions can be difficult is that people are involved, and eliminating tasks or job positions can lead to hurt feelings, especially if seen as subjective. McKeown theorizes that the best way to objectively determine what and who are essential starts by clearly defining the essential intent of your organization. He recommends using this intent matrix to illustrate what does and does not constitute an essential intent.
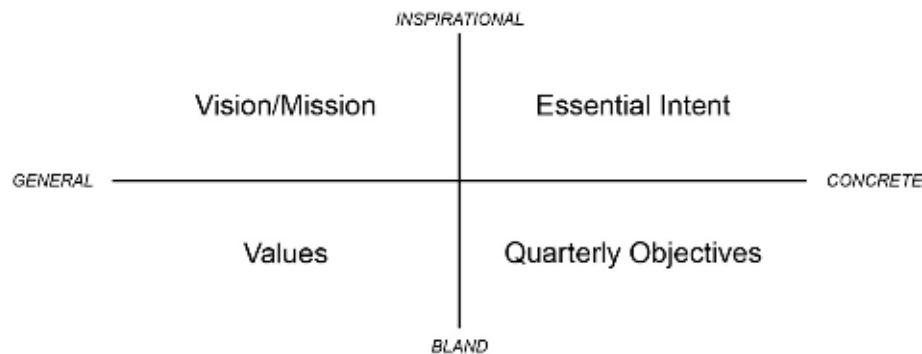

Figure 1. Intent Matrix from Greg McKeown's book, Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less, p.116.

The Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation had already developed a mission statement, strategic plan, and core values before implementing this framework. However, writing an essential intent was new and the most helpful part of the process. McKeown describes an essential intent as "concrete", "easy to measure", and "one decision that eliminates 1000 later decisions" (McKeown, 2014, p. 116) This is how RIDI populated the intent matrix:

Vision/Mission // The Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation exists to advance pioneering, positive, and productive design solutions to real-world problems by partnering learners with professionals in support of the creative economy in southwest Michigan and beyond.

Values // Empathy, Innovation, Transdisciplinarity, Collaboration, Exchange, Flexibility

Quarterly Objectives // Semester progress is based on these five goals from the RIDI strategic plan.

Goal #1: Recruit talented individuals that are committed to excellence.
Objective 1.1: Enroll students that are artistically and academically gifted.
Objective 1.2: Hire complementary faculty members who are dedicated to distinguished teaching, research, and service.
Objective 1.3: Hire specialized staff members to assist students and faculty with research.
Objective 1.4: Develop relationships with respected community and industry partners.

Goal #2: Build infrastructure conducive to creative problem solving.
Objective 2.1: Furnish renovated facilities with capable tools and technology.
Objective 2.2: Outfit student design studio with resources on design theory, materials, and manufacturing processes.
Objective 2.3: Develop and implement a modern and relevant design curriculum.
Objective 2.4: Create research labs funded via federal and foundation grants.
Objective 2.5: Offer study abroad opportunities to afford students international perspective.

Goal #3: Integrate curriculum with regional industry partners.
Objective 3.1: Participate in industry-sponsored projects when appropriate.
Objective 3.2: Build professional network at industry-related events.
Objective 3.3: Host events and conferences at RIDI facilities.
Objective 3.4: Maintain robust internship network to facilitate student expertise.
Objective 3.5: Assess progress regularly with Industry Advisory Board.

Goal #4: Leverage and promote extraordinary results.
Objective 4.1: Enter and win design competitions.
Objective 4.2: Publish research and present at respected conferences and events.
Objective 4.3: Grant interviews with media outlets when asked; seek when advantageous.
Objective 4.4: Commercialize intellectual property that has potential.

Goal #5: Steward positive and meaningful relationships.
Objective 5.1: Track and maintain contact with current and future alumni.
Objective 5.2: Identify and promote potential employment opportunities.
Objective 5.3: Steward current donors and identify potential donors.
Objective 5.4: Develop and operate a responsible budget that is financially sustainable.

Essential Intent // All RIDI Product Design students get jobs upon graduation.

This essential intent is to the point and will be easy to measure when the first cohort of seniors graduates in April 2021. Recommitting to the vision/mission statement, core values, and strategic plan, while adding an essential intent gave us a lens to base all future decisions on what to eliminate.

3.2 STEP 2 – ELIMINATE

The next step was listing all of the activities of the Institute to determine which were essential and which were nonessential.

Figure 2. List of Institute activities with eliminated activities shown in strikethrough.

The task list was then compared to the RIDI Strategic Plan. It appeared that most all activities in some way aligned with the goals of the strategic plan, other than committee work. Therefore, it was decided that all committee work that would not directly impact the undergraduate Product Design students would be eliminated for the 2020-2021 academic year.

Next, the list was compared to the essential intent of the Institute, that all students get jobs upon graduation. All planning dedicated towards Institute growth beyond undergraduate education was put on hold. That included plans for a master's degree, continuing and executive education programs, and summer camps. RIDI also decided to reduce or eliminate independent study credit due to an expected increase in teaching load. Most important was a renewed commitment to remove students who are not on pace to graduate or be competitive for jobs upon graduation.

Finally, the list was considered in the larger context of COVID-19. At WMU there are many constraints due to COVID-19 that were instituted by the Governor of Michigan and the University administration. Most relevant were a hiring freeze, a ban on holding large events on campus, and a work-related travel ban. That meant all activities related to recruiting faculty, hiring staff, hosting events, traveling to events, speaking at conferences, and studying abroad were eliminated.

It is understood that eliminating some of these activities will be more difficult than others. It will require faculty and staff to have strong boundaries and self-control. It will also require a system to keep them from falling into old habits, collapsing under pressure, overpromising, or overscheduling during this difficult time. As Greg McKeown says, "If you don't prioritize your life, someone else will." (McKeown, 2014, p. 14)

4. RESULTS

4.1 STEP 3 – EXECUTE

The resulting system is meant to protect the faculty and staff of RIDI by giving them guidelines they can reference when external pressures are trying to drain their time and bandwidth. It is based on the Dieter

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Rams quote "less, but better" that McKeown often references in the book. There are four themes and subsequent principles in this "less, but better" system that will be implemented in fall 2020.

Theme 1 // Less meetings, but better prepared.
We are committed to the professional development of our faculty and staff, and will protect their research and creative time when possible. Strategy: Eliminate unneeded meetings, especially in-person meetings. 2. Eliminate committee responsibilities, unless they directly impact the undergraduate students.

Theme 2 // Less events, but better connected.
We are committed to our students and corporate partners and will foster virtual networking and co-curricular learning opportunities when feasible. Strategy: Eliminate on-campus events. Eliminate travel, off-campus events, in-person conference presentations, and study abroad.

Theme 3 // Less scaling, but better focused.
We are committed to the current and incoming Product Design undergraduate students, and will not shift focus until programmatic objectives are met. Strategy: Eliminate planning for programs not relevant to the undergraduate Product Design students. Eliminate recruitment of future faculty and staff members.

Theme 4 // Less teaching, but better mentorship.
We are committed to giving every student the opportunity to reach her full potential but will do so in an efficient manner within the classroom structure and scheduled office hours. Sometimes the most appropriate mentorship is an honest conversation about whether or not Product Design is the right career path for the student. Mentorship from practitioners should be emphasized when possible to complement the faculty/student relationship. Strategy: Eliminate independent studies. Eliminate underperforming students.

4.2 2020-2021 ACADEMIC YEAR PROJECTION
Successful implementation of this "less, but better" system will allow us to eliminate the nonessential and instead focus on balancing two main objectives this academic year: student success and faculty development. Student success is typically measured in technical skills, internships received, design competitions won, and ultimately in employment. Faculty success is ultimately determined through the tenure and promotion process. These objectives are often in struggle, vying for time and resources.

The "less, but more" system emphasizes mentorship over teaching, however. This should allow students to find self-reliance and inspiration from sources other than the faculty. The Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation is committed to involving design practitioners at all stages of the curriculum and has found success in several programs that relieve stress from faculty and give students networking opportunities.

- Design Seminar - Offered in the spring semester, Design Seminar is a weekly lecture series featuring design practitioners. In spring 2019 designers from Stryker, Argenta Park, Newell Brands, Tekna, Steelcase, Eaton, Rise Design, and Wahl Clipper made on-campus, Webex, or podcast presentations for the Product Design students.

- Guest Lecturers - Local designers participated in design courses by leading discussions, creating projects, offering demonstrations, or critiquing student work. Notably, Caleb Gossens, Senior Staff Industrial Designer at Stryker, led a demo on foamcore prototyping. Larry DePaoli, from Uniform Color Company, gave a lecture on color theory and manufacturing considerations to the Materials and Processes course.

- Mentorship Program - In fall 2019, RIDI piloted a mentorship program. Each of the 17 juniors were partnered with a regional designer who offered to discuss portfolio, projects, or just offer life/professional advice. The mentorship from these designers made a noticeable impact on the skillset, professionalism, and confidence of these designers. In the future, all juniors and seniors will be partnered with a mentor.

5. DISCUSSION // RESIST FEATURE CREEP

Designers are trained to avoid "feature creep," which is when a product with too many features inevitably performs none of them well. We suffer from feature creep in Industrial Design education as well. It seems that every year there is more and more we try to cram into a 4-year Industrial Design education, whether it is UI/UX, coding, sustainability, service and systems design, or business strategy. Meanwhile, faculty fill the hours required for "deep work" with unnecessary or impromptu meetings, committee work, and emails. In trying to accomplish everything, it is worth considering whether we are actually accomplishing anything of substantial value?

By filtering the activities of the Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation through the framework in Greg McKeown's book *Essentialism: The Disciplined Pursuit of Less*, the Institute was able to objectively eliminate some nonessential functions for the 2020-2021 academic year while recommitting to the most important elements of the program. However, some parts of the framework were more applicable than others. For example, RIDI had already written a vision/mission statement, core values, and strategic plan, so the part of the framework that was most beneficial was writing an essential intent. This aligns with the theory of Greg McKeown, that identifying your essential intent is the first step towards eliminating nonessential activities. However, without replication at other universities, it is impossible to know whether the essential intent is actually the most useful part of the framework or whether it was just most useful to RIDI because it was the only new information.

The framework was also more appropriate when used in context with the other COVID-19 restrictions than when used alone. The framework itself did not identify all elements that needed to be eliminated, as some elements deemed essential within the *Essentialism* framework still had to be eliminated due to COVID-19 related heath and budget issues.

While Greg McKeown's framework is tailored for the elimination of tasks, it does not provide structure for replacing one activity with more appropriate ones. For example, due to COVID-19 restrictions, we cannot take students to conferences in the coming year. Luckily, many conferences went virtual and are offering reduced registration fees. While the students will not be able to travel to a conference in person, this might allow them to attend several more conferences for far less money. It reduces the significant undertaking required of faculty and staff to plan a student trip, yet it is leading to additional opportunities for the students. While this may not be in the spirit of the *Essentialism* framework, and perhaps not even in the spirit of Dieter Ram's "less is more" philosophy, it is certainly a "more from less" mentality that many educators will have to implement during this challenging time.

6. CONCLUSION

In a case study at Western Michigan University's Richmond Institute for Design + Innovation, Greg McKeown's *Essentialism* framework has proven useful when combined with other aspects of the COVID-

19 decision-making process. It is expected that other universities would also find the framework beneficial for making difficult cost-saving decisions during this stressful time.

COVID-19 has forced the world to pause and reconsider what is essential. Distance learning has placed significant budgetary challenges on higher education. Combined with other existential crises like rising tuition costs and student debt, academia is truly encountering what is known as a wicked problem. The crisis is not going away, and will not resolve itself, so the only way to approach this wicked problem is to consider it a wicked opportunity. If ever there was a time for wholesale changes to the academic status quo, it is now.

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