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Paradigm Shift

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Katherine Ankerson believes the key to effective higher education involves not just “instruction” but more importantly “learning.” The difference marks a paradigm shift in education, and is tailored to today’s students, based on their life experiences with technology and rapid change.

“Students today are digital natives,” Ankerson said. “In their experience, there has always been a computer, the Internet, cellphones and other technology. That’s a fundamental difference from previous generations. And to be most effective we must take that into account.

“Because information is readily available, it means a higher degree of discernment is needed to determine what is factual knowledge and what is not necessarily factual at all, even though it is prevalent on the Internet. This information literacy is a critical skill for students.”

Ankerson has led the department of interior architecture and product design since June 2011, when she joined Kansas State University’s faculty. She said learning environments in design schools need to be rethought in a contemporary — and future — context to address the needs of designing for a changing society.

“One of the features that sets our department apart from others in the U.S. is the way we approach design education in an interwoven curriculum: interior architecture plus furniture design plus product design,” Ankerson said. “By studying design in this holistic manner, students become more versatile and develop a variety of marketable skills.”

Students earn a master’s degree and gain expertise in a unique program that gives them this valuable integrated experience.

Ankerson has earned national recognition for her research into the most effective ways of educating today’s college students. She received the Interior Design Educators Council 2013 Book Award for her book, “Illustrated Codes for Designers: Residential.” This was the second consecutive national IDEC Book Award for the department. Vibhavari Jani, associate professor, won it in 2012 for her book, “Diversity in Design: Perspectives from the Non-Western World.”

Ankerson was the project lead on an award-winning website, “Lighting Across the [Design] Curriculum.” It was designed to provide access to lighting information, examples and exercises that can be used during all levels of college education and across multiple disciplines. It won the IDEC 2013 Media Award. The winning team included Neal Hubbell, associate professor and associate department head in interior architecture and product design, and eight faculty members from three other major universities.

Ankerson, faculty members and second-through fifth-year students in her department recently wrapped up a collaboration with the Herman Miller company. The project is “21st Century Education: Paradigm Shift from ‘Instruction’ to ‘Learning’ Encourages Innovation and Collaboration in Design Education Settings.” Designed to weave together research, prototype development and practice, it simultaneously developed a culture of collaboration and innovation among students and courses within the discipline. Conducted during the 2012-2013 academic year, participants integrated history, theory and a future vision of supporting innovation in the workplace and learning environments.
Ankerson said the project benefited immensely from collaboration with Herman Miller.

“Herman Miller’s expertise and support opened valuable areas of research and knowledge to the students.

“We try to activate learning as much as possible because that’s where the most learning occurs,” Ankerson said. To prepare them for the business world, students learn not only how to utilize the latest advanced technology, but how to collaborate most effectively with colleagues.

“We need to use new communication and interaction technologies; virtual/distance learning scenarios; digital visualization and prototyping technologies, and, at the same time, enhance personal interactions for collaboration,” Ankerson said.

The department’s five-year program of study is one of the first curricula in this profession to be recognized and accredited by the Council for Interior Design Accreditation and the National Association of Schools of Art and Design in the United States. DesignIntelligence magazine has consistently ranked the college’s design programs among the best in the nation.

By Cheryl May, Communications and Marketing