Top 10 Tips for Applied Arts and Design College Students

The following tips from Jonathan DeAscentis, dean of academic affairs at The Art Institute of California – Los Angeles, a campus of Argosy University, are excerpted from the forthcoming edition of The Secrets of College Success ©2013, Professors' Guide LLC.

Top 10 Tips for Applied Arts and Design College Students

The creativity of designers can be seen almost anywhere you look, from innovative product packaging and apparel design to 3D characters in movies and artfully-displayed cuisines. For creative people interested in the areas of industrial and advertising design, fashion, media arts, game design and animation, interior design, and the culinary arts, the right mix of education, imagination, and motivation can lead to a fulfilling career -- starting with an applied arts or design college (or else a design or arts program at a four-year liberal arts college). We invited visiting scholar Jonathan DeAscentis, dean of academic affairs at The Art Institute of California-- Los Angeles, to share some tips about how to succeed academically at an applied arts college. Here’s what he recommends:

1. **Treat class like a job.** For many applied arts courses, the demands of class are intended to mimic industry expectations and collaborative work environments. Prepare to treat your classes and coursework like a job.

   **Reality Check.** Consider how your boss and work colleagues would react if you showed up unprepared and late, or not at all, for a consultation session with a client. Now think of your professor as one such client.

2. **Start your portfolio.** An effective portfolio must demonstrate the skills and knowledge of a student, just as well as it represents a student’s personal brand and identity. Whether you are a graphic designer, fashion designer, web or other designer, the key questions to ask (and answer) as you start your collection of work include: “Who am I?” “How am I unique?” “What artistic strengths do I bring to the project?” “What am I passionate about?” And, most generally, “What is my goal as an artist and creator?” Reflecting on these questions as you assemble your portfolio of creative work will not only keep your work centered on your own identity as an artist, but will also help you amass the work that is going to go into the portfolio of your work.

   **5-Star Tip.** Ask -- and answer -- these questions at the start of your college career to help get you to where you want to go in your professional career. Don’t forget to revisit these key questions regularly along the way. And train yourself to talk about your work. A career in any creative art will require you to express – in words and to other people – what you have in mind as a creator. Practice communicating, orally and in writing, what your goals are as an artist and how you think your work manifests them.

3. **Participate and Volunteer.** Attend class, join campus activities, and show up to professional clubs and organizations to share your work and ideas with fellow artists and designers. Also, try to volunteer for community service and industry related-events to start showing your work more broadly and to make the connections you will need when you are ready for a job. For instance, budding web designers need to befriend great coders; beginning chefs will do well to connect with savvy restaurant managers; filmmakers will benefit from linking up with visual effects and 3D artists. Particularly in emerging
industries and fields, connections are what help someone put together a team for a freelance project or young company, or can be instrumental in finding work.

4. **Identify a faculty mentor.** Remember that your instructors are experts in their fields with lots of insight to share. Pick one you admire and seek out a mentoring relationship.

5. **Intern.** To gain real-world experience, develop connections and grow as an artist, become an intern or look for a job in your field of study - at the best place you can. Search for these openings early, and when you secure the position, give it all you have.

   **5-Star Tip.** Seek out your campus career center as soon as possible. The advisers there are dedicated to providing local resources and helping you gain valuable work experience. Also, if you know someone in the community working in your field of choice, seek him or her out. Often acquaintances outside college feel very warmly when people they know in a college want to join their team.

6. **Become financially literate.** Do this right away. It is important to educate yourself on your financial choices and outcomes. Moreover, individuals with creative talents such as graphic design, photography or video production, for example, also have opportunities to freelance. Consult with your career services department to see what guidance they can offer regarding ad hoc assignments (e.g., going rates, tax considerations).

7. **Apply yourself.** There are many, many design and art competitions out there looking for emerging talent and student participation at no cost. Keep an eye open for the next “call for entries,” and apply. A win or recognition will make for a great work sample for your portfolio and an accolade for your resume. And it’ll make you feel better about your work: after all, the contest probably had lots of entries which were judged less good than yours.

8. **Be your own publicist.** Don’t be shy about sharing your accomplishments with faculty, mentors, and club colleagues. They may pass along your good news and lead you to a great opportunity in the future.

   **Extra Pointer.** If your school or program has a newsletter or does an e-mail blast from time to time, be sure to get your achievement noted. You never know who reads these things.

   **Reality Check.** Even when you are still a student, consider yourself a professional and act in a way that reflects well. This means being mindful of on- and offline behavior, and being respectful of fellow artists and colleagues.

9. **Stay inspired.** The road to graduation is challenging for many reasons. Even the best designers and artists feel overwhelmed and discouraged at one point or another (indeed, often the most gifted students set themselves the highest standards, and are most unhappy when they don’t quite get up to them). Remind yourself of your goals and why you are at school in the first place: to earn your degree and continue on the path to becoming an executive chef, owner of your own fashion label or to achieve your own creative successes. Then tap the network of students and faculty that you have created for support.
10. **Stay connected.** Don’t let all the time and effort you’ve spent developing relationships go to waste once you graduate. Plan to stay connected with your fellow alumni, mentors, and faculty. Build up your own personal web- and/or Facebook page. Sign up for newsletters, collect contact information, connect via social media. And if you have occasion to show your work, be sure to invite all your friends and acquaintances to have a look. Invite them to look at the ads you’ve designed, the meal you’ve cooked, the clothing you’ve designed, or whatever the product of your creative talents is.