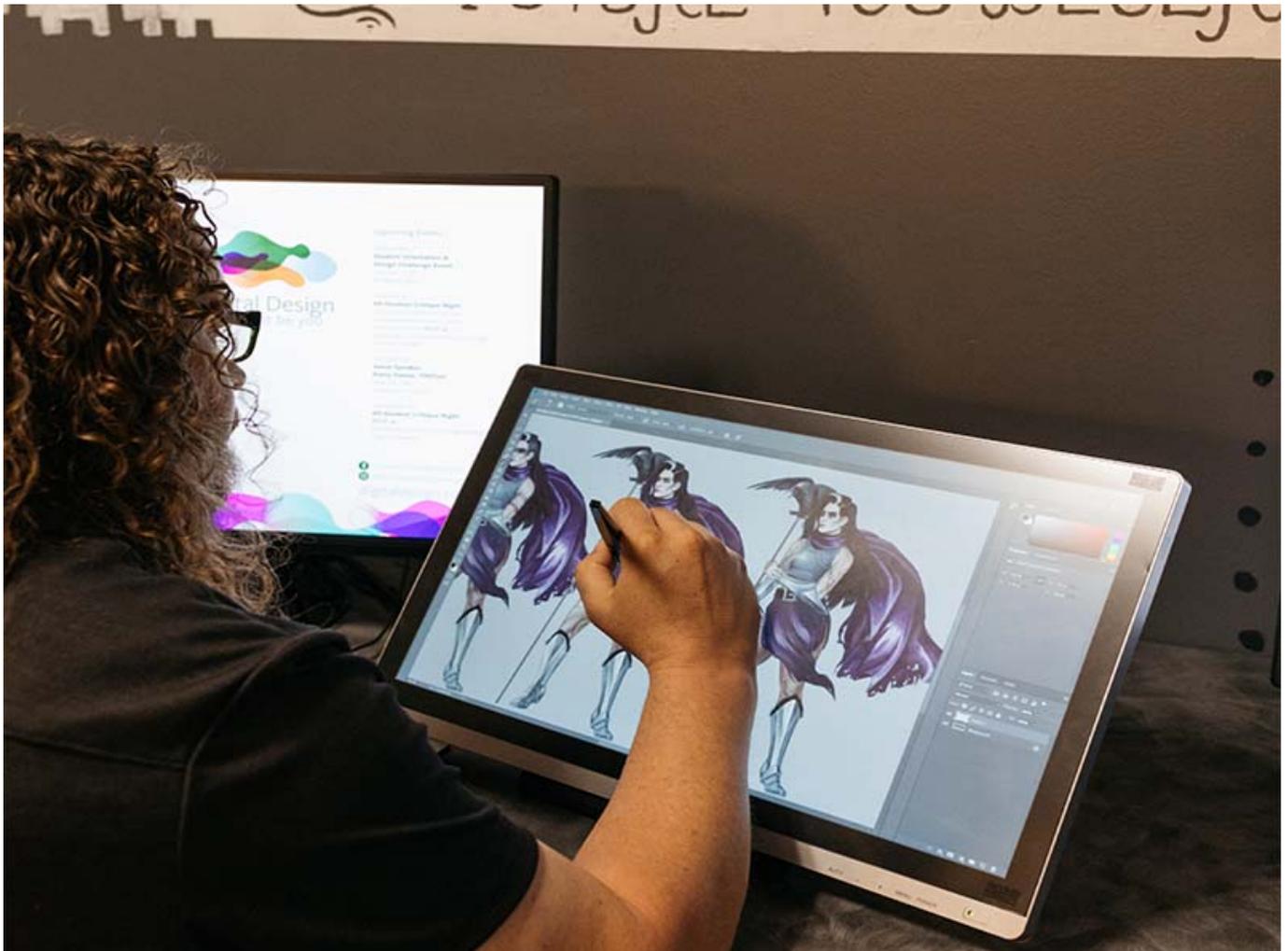# SoPA's Digital Design program has record-setting, award-winning first year

August 07, 2019 2:30 PM

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SoPA's Digital Design students took home 21 of 22 ADDY awards for their work during the program's first year. (Photo by Hannah McSwain)

A year ago, Tulane University's School of Professional Advancement (SoPA) re-introduced a new, updated digital design program with concentrations in graphic design, interactive design and game art and animation. The new courses and the launch of three new computer labs resulted in a 50-percent increase in enrollment following the first year. The year also proved to be record-setting in other ways.

SoPA students claimed 21 of 22 ADDY awards for student work at the Advertising Club of New Orleans' annual competition. Two of those students garnered regional honors and competed at the

national competition.

In addition to a bachelor of arts degree, the program offers a post-baccalaureate certificate and a digital design minor. The concentrations and courses were created and configured to bridge the gap between art and technology and are aligned with current industry needs.

> *"Part of our mission is to align with workforce needs and to prepare students to dive straight into the industry after graduation."*
>
> *-Amanda Garcia*

"The catalyst behind re-launching the digital design program was the hiring of Amanda Garcia, the former program director and first faculty member ever tenured in graphic design at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi," SoPA Dean Suri Duitch said. "Amanda was running the program there, and we recruited her to Tulane. She came here to lead our program and has really turned it upside down and expanded it. She has a very ambitious vision to build this program by working with people from the local industry and has used their input to create the current curriculum."

Garcia is also the driving force behind the program's quick take-off. One of her first tasks when she arrived at Tulane was to identify workforce needs in the Greater New Orleans area. Building off of labor market data that shows a growing need for professionals in this field, she worked with local industry leaders, who currently find they must recruit design employees from outside the city, despite New Orleans' reputation as a creative town.

Garcia quickly went to work, developing a rigorous curriculum that prepares students to enter the workforce following graduation. She set up a curriculum committee, comprised of both faculty and students, and an industry advisory board to provide both up-front and ongoing feedback on the program's curricula.

According to regional and national workforce projections for the next five years in Louisiana, graphic design jobs will grow by 9.43 percent, interactive design positions will increase by 23.02 percent and opportunities in animation and virtual reality will increase by 11.8 percent.

Garcia also oversaw the construction of three new labs at SoPA's Elmwood campus with cutting-edge technology and creative collaborative spaces. These spaces allow students to develop a foundation in the technologies used by those with innovative tech design careers and were also designed to mimic industry work settings.

"Part of our mission is to align with workforce needs and to prepare students to dive straight into the industry after graduation," Garcia said. "We do this in a variety of ways, such as embedding real-world projects into each course, utilizing service-learning community projects whenever possible and inviting industry professionals to critiques and presentations."

One of the innovative ways in which students gain hands-on experience is the creation of the SoPA Digital Design Co-Op. The mock in-house agency allows local and regional businesses the opportunity to commission innovative, quality design work. To date, students have worked with three different start-up companies, including MobileQubes and Contractor Wrangler.

There is a minimum buy-in for each company that includes 100 hours of design work. The funds pay for stipends for participating students and a lead faculty member, as well as to fund special purchases. The faculty member acts as the creative director and project manager. Students assume other critical roles, such as production artist and art director.

"We saw the co-op as a great opportunity to grow a student's portfolio and to help fundraise for special items that we need. Last year, we were able to buy large tablets for our gaming students.

Tulane University

We are proud that the work created in the co-op garnered an ADDY award as well," Garcia said.

The trio of degree options for the digital design tracks makes the program a versatile major for both traditional and non-traditional students. Student Tamzen Jenkins taught middle and high school English for five years before returning to college to pursue a career in a creative industry. She enrolled in SoPA with the intent of taking a few classes to expand her graphic design skills.

A year and a half later, she has completed the post-baccalaureate certificate program and is a professional graphic designer. During her time in the digital design program, she refined and developed her skills to focus on logo creation, print and digital design, branding, front-end web design, photography and photo editing. She worked with a local photographer and completed freelance projects with small business owners, a local nonprofit, and a local education program. After completing an internship with a local energy efficiency program, she has recently moved into a full-time design position with the program. Jenkins won ADDY awards for logo design and, with her peers, an award for their work with the co-op.

"The SoPA program has been a major catalyst in my success and has essentially created a pathway that led to many professional opportunities," Jenkins said. "I have also worked with the SoPA digital design co-op, under the leadership of Amanda Garcia and Professor Rebecca Carr. Through the co-op, working with my peers as a group, I have gained real-life graphic design experience while working directly with large companies."

"I feel like we are well-beyond where we hoped to be after the first year. Our students have exceeded our expectations. They're winning awards at a level that is competing with all major design and art schools in the country. They are at the national competition level in literally two semesters," Garcia said.

"Our first year was about the students, the people we engaged within the community and the advisory groups. We want to spread the word about our program's success to the greater New Orleans community, throughout the state of Louisiana and beyond in the second year. Our goal is to attract national attention and get the national radar. We established proof of concept in year one, and it's time to spread the word in year two," Garcia added.