

# Black Designers Still Fight For A Seat At The Table--Are They Finding Success?

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It's been nearly 60 years since the first black woman obtained an architecture license in the U.S.

And recently there has been a slow, though steady, rise in black enrollment in college design and arts degree programs, and a sharp uptick in the number of minority architects.

Yet African Americans today remain vastly underemployed, not only in architecture but in all the interior and graphic design professions as well.

The reasons remain somewhat elusive as the issue continues to bedevil magazines and trade shows, design firms and baccalaureate arts programs.

Some experts blame a pipeline effect that stems from underfunded art programs at the high school level. Others say it's a case of black designers simply not being invited to the table. What most insiders agree on, however, is that diversity in design makes for a much richer experience, both for the design community and for the consuming public.

"For the design fields to be as underrepresented as they are means that the quality and relevance of the work to a broad and diverse population is really just problematic," says Joel Towers, executive dean of [Parsons The New School for Design in New York City](#). "You don't have the richness of ideas and possibilities that are presented by having multiple perspectives going into the work.

"The problem has been talked about publicly since 1954, when [Norma Merrick Sklarek became the first black female to receive an architecture license](#) in the United States. More than a decade later in 1968, the problem prompted [National Urban League president Whitney Young's famous call to action at the American Institute of Architects' National Convention](#).

According to the [National Association of Schools of Art and Design](#), about 103,000 students enrolled in art/design-focused bachelor of fine arts programs across the country in the fall of 2010. The same semester, nearly 3,600 black non-Hispanic students enrolled.

While NASAD doesn't track the degrees those students attained and although not every design school in the country reports in, their data does suggest a jump in overall design school enrollment, from 72,000 in 2000 (2,300 of which were black non-Hispanic) to 84,000 in 2005, with 3,200 identifying as black.

It's still a far cry from the numbers of students enrolling in liberal arts programs and even further behind the curve when African Americans are factored in.

"If you look at higher education, you see that art and design in general are not drawing as large a population and as diverse a population from the high school level into the college level," Towers says. The problem, he believes, starts very early and lies in public schools' inability to keep up with art or design courses.

"So the first thing to get cut when school budgets are cut is art," he says, leaving colleges like his with a smaller, and certainly a less diverse, pool of talent to draw from.

Judy Nylen, director of career services at [Pratt Institute in New York City](#) agrees. "The decline of art programs at the high school level, as budgets are cut and math and science are pushed, means even less understanding of what is possible in creative fields," she says, referring to a long-standing belief that art and design are less viable career options than, say, medicine or law.

It's a notion that these institutions and others are fighting to dispel through weekend enrichment programs, like the [Pre-College Preparation Scholarship Program at Parsons](#), which provides students with full scholarships, beginning in their sophomore years of high school. The program includes courses in fine arts, design and portfolio preparation, along with mentoring from students who've gone on to college.

In Philadelphia, the Charter School for Architecture and Design is tackling the notion in its own way, offering students 80 minutes of coursework each day centered on architecture and design.

Once barriers are broken in high school, the focus shifts to maintaining diversity at the college level and beyond.