

Breaking Down Barriers for Young Designers of Color with Mercy's Connect 4 Program

When Mercy College launched a revolutionary mentoring program for students of color, the stage was set for a more diverse representation in the field of design. Named “Connect 4: Networking for Equality in Design,” the goal of the program was to not only help young talents find employment as designers after graduation but give them a shot at becoming leaders who will shape the future of design.

Connect 4: Networking for Equality in Design is a collaborative project among the Mercy College Design + Animation Program, the global design firm Pentagram and a cohort of design leaders. Piloted in the fall of 2019, the program has netted impressive results. Mercy design students have secured internships and employment at esteemed institutions, including the Whitney Museum, Penguin Random House, CUNY Law, Lettershop, Pentagram, Michelle Cassuto Design and more.

Word is getting around. Connect 4 is the focus of a podcast developed in collaboration with “Design Observer,” a leading industry blog. To listen to the podcast, visit www.mercy.edu/connect4. Each episode features a dynamic conversation between a Connect 4 student and their mentor, with topics ranging from artistic confidence to finding inspiration. Regular posts on social media are raising the program's profile even higher.

Connect 4 owes its beginnings to Mercy faculty member Jen Roos, associate professor of graphic design. Roos, who also heads her own independent creative agency, has made diversity in design her passion. “The graphic design field has long been dominated by white people,” she said. “BIPOC [Black, indigenous and other people of color] creatives have been working to change that balance. Mercy's commitment to supporting young designers of color, while they are still learning, is key to accelerating that shift.”

In 2018, Roos and two colleagues, Jen Wang of Random House and Caitlin Dover, formerly of the Guggenheim Museum, collaborated on a grant from the Association of Graphic Artists (AIGA) to encourage greater diversity and inclusion in design. Mercy was awarded an \$11,000 foundational grant and launched its first cohort of four students and four mentors the following fall.

The program's concept is simple: qualified Mercy design students are paired with prominent designers of color to increase their knowledge base, develop networks and pursue pathways to industry leadership. Students and mentors meet regularly for advice, brainstorming, discussion of goals, and meetings with established designers and design companies.

“Design has long been a highly competitive industry,” said Roos. “For students of color, entering the design field can seem like a complete mystery, with many barriers to entry. That's what the AIGA grant's support was intended to address.”

The Student Experience

Design student Zaiah Sampson '23, transferred to Mercy in 2019 to take advantage of the study abroad program. “I've always wanted to visit Korea, and I planned to go in the spring,” she recalled. The pandemic changed her plans, and she enrolled in the Connect 4 program where she was paired with Min Lew, a designer with Base, an international branding and communications agency, who was raised in Seoul, South Korea. “We had many conversations, such as where I could improve and how I could build a stronger portfolio,” said Sampson. Lew alerted her to more opportunities than she ever imagined. “I used to wonder if my only real career option was teaching art. I believed that having a creative career would not be financially viable,” Sampson said. “Connect 4 has opened my eyes to more financially stable career paths within the art and design world.” Today Sampson is studying the Korean language and following the work of Korean designers. “My networking has grown so much, and my work has improved. I have more confidence now that I know how to apply what I've learned.”

Adnan Bishtawi '22, was paired with mentor Natasha Jen of Pentagram. In their podcast episode, they discuss how to stay focused and inspired while struggling to pay the bills. While at Mercy, Bishtawi's parents divorced, and he scrambled to help with the family finances. “I'd leave work some nights at two in the morning and attend class early the next morning. It was a real grind,” he said. “I wouldn't suggest doing that, but sometimes you don't have a choice.”

As a non-traditional student with a few semesters of design school under her belt, Sakinah Bell '22 was a little intimidated. “Not only did I have to learn something new, I had to stop being so hard on myself.” Her mentor, Forest Young, Senior Director, Global Brand Design at Rivian, remarked, “Design education provides the tools, but there's also a process that



2020 Cohort

MENTORS

Natasha Jen,
PENTAGRAM

Jonathan Jackson,
WSDIS

Man + Mina Wai,
ADOLESCENT

Victor Newman,
VICTOR NEWMAN

Eddie Opara,
PENTAGRAM

Forest Young,
WOLF OLINS

Kojo Boateng,
PBS

Min Lew,
BASE

MENTEES

Adnan Bishtawi, *Senior*

Avalon Blanco, *Senior*

Ana Parada, *Junior*

Tyriq Moore, *Senior*

Zaiah Sampson, *Junior*

Brian Jean, *Sophomore*

Sakinah Bell, *Junior*

creative people need to learn and practice.”

Tyriq Moore '23 chose Mercy for its animation program, hoping to learn more about the comics he loved to read. “When I got to my first foundation class, I realized I knew next to nothing,” he said. His mentor, Pentagram partner Eddie Opara, reassured him, saying, “We all have a ways to go. Just keep on practicing.”

Breaking Down Barriers

The Connect 4 students are thriving from their meaningful connections — and so are the mentors. Opara, a founding mentor in addition to being an established designer at Pentagram, helped recruit additional designers to mentor the first cohort. “Eddie was so enthusiastic about the pilot program that when it ended, he provided funding to allow it to continue for another year,” said Roos. Indeed, the second round of funding provided by Opara — at \$25,000, more than twice that of the inaugural year — enabled Connect 4 to double the size of the second cohort, from four pairs to eight.

“Connect 4 has provided students of color with a big career advantage,” said Josh Gaetjen, program director of Design + Animation program at Mercy. “To

be taken under the wing of a high-level designer who has experienced the type of barriers and setbacks that people of color encounter in our country — it’s an extraordinary opportunity.”

“It’s much more than getting a foot in the door,” said Roos. “Connect 4 graduates are getting *through* the door. High-level agencies are starting to recognize Mercy’s design program as having the potential to compete with the best-known design schools in producing a new and more diverse generation of designers.”

“Connect 4 epitomizes Mercy’s mission, especially as it pertains to removing the educational barriers that can deter even the most motivated student,” said Peter West, Ph.D., interim provost of Mercy College who previously served as dean of the School of Liberal Arts. “We are grateful for the support we’ve received from the grant, as well as from the founding members and the mentors. The growing Connect 4 network has made an incredible investment in our students that will follow them all throughout their lives.”

To learn more about Mercy’s Design and Animation program visit artdesign.mercy.edu or the program’s Instagram: @mercydesignanimation.