



Design Scholarship: What is it and how does it count (for tenure)?

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Design, craft, art wear, functional design, technical design, and creative design - these are a few of the ways in which ITAA members describe the focus of their design/creative work. Obviously design, as it is practiced by our diverse membership, is multi-faceted. Bye (2010) argued that a “different context is needed for creative scholarship,” and it should be one that both adds to our knowledge base and moves us toward building theory. Where we are as a discipline regarding defining and presenting design as research, for whom it is intended, and how it should be situated within the academy is still in flux. Additionally, in today’s academic climate there is an increasing demand for accountability in higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to examine design scholarship, as it is currently perceived, measured, and disseminated in our field.

This research aims to gain a comprehensive understanding of how ITAA members (both colleagues who practice design and those who do not) view the significance of design scholarship presented at ITAA meetings and published in peer-reviewed journals. Current ITAA members were surveyed to explore their understanding and assessment of design scholarship. The levels of membership that were eligible included: Professional, Emeritus, and Graduate Students. According to the ITAA website (itaaonline.org) membership search, at the time of the survey, there were 536 eligible members. 74 members completed the online survey, resulting in a 14% response rate. Of the survey respondents, 77% were professional members, 4% were emeritus, and 19% were graduate students. Respondent’s age ($n=70$) ranged from 26 – 73 years old ($M=49.94$, $SD=13.16$). The majority of the survey respondents reside in the U.S. (97%). Two other countries, China and The Republic of Korea were also represented. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents ($n=47$) submit design scholarship to ITAA.

What is it? A key finding of the survey results was that there was not a unified definition of design scholarship. This is understandable, given our diverse membership. A Word Cloud (ATLAS.ti) generated from the 70 textual responses found the ten most common words used by members to define design scholarship include (in descending order): research (used 35 times), scholarship, creative, new, process, knowledge, theory, exploration, technique, and product. The most used words are an indicator of how the current membership views design scholarship – as first and foremost research. Members cited Boyer’s (1990) and Manzini & Coad’s (2015) essays on design research as possible references when defining design scholarship for our field. Designers were also asked to select a statement that best represents their design scholarship. Members resoundingly selected “design as process – the process is the focal point, and the product is the outcome.” Future work is needed to craft a holistic definition of design scholarship that represents current members work, but a working definition should place emphasis on the design process as a valued outcome.

Does it count? The second aim was to understand the weight of design scholarship for scholars on promotion and tenure (P&T), given today’s academic climate of research accountability. Sixty-two percent of the interviewees are at research institutions, 31% are at teaching institutions,

and 7% report not knowing if they are at a research or teaching-focused school. The survey respondents represented both tenured (n=41) and non-tenured faculty (n=33). Of the tenured faculty, the majority of respondents are associate professor rank (n=20). Tenured faculty were asked what percentage of the research component of their dossier was composed of peer-reviewed publications and design scholarship. Peer-reviewed publications were $M=55.44$ ($SD=35.88$) of the research portion of their dossier while $M=33.03$ ($SD=34.40$) was design scholarship. Given the current academic climate, it is important to benchmark the percent breakdowns to see if these numbers change in the future.

One of the more sobering findings of this research was that 73% respondents report that they have *not* published their design scholarship in peer-reviewed journal articles. This statistic is further compounded by the finding that over 79% of scholars say that they do not cite others proceedings files or work from the design catalog. The majority of design scholars (74%) do not know how many times their design scholarship has been cited from either the proceedings files or catalog. Based on these findings, design scholars do not go back to these documents to cite other scholars. One reason, perhaps, is that the proceedings and catalogs are not easily retrievable. The researchers asked what types of metrics are used to measure the impact of peer-reviewed publications as compared to design scholarship. Forty-two percent of respondents reported that their departments use a metric to measure the impact factor of publications whereas only 18% use a metric to gauge the impact of design scholarship. Both the *quality of journals* and the *number of citations* are the most commonly used metrics to measure the impact factor of peer-reviewed publications, whereas the majority of respondents were not aware of the metric used to measure the impact factor of design scholarship. Many respondents noted that the acceptance rate for juried exhibitions was the most commonly used metric for design scholarship in P&T process. Thus the common method of dissemination for design scholarship at ITAA meetings is not as effective as other, more impactful methods (e.g. peer-reviewed publications). For design scholarship to be valuable to P&T and in the broader sense of situating our work in the larger design context, the survey results suggest working to build a cohesive body of work to which the impact of the work is measurable and retrievable. Publishing design scholarship through peer-reviewed publications (over proceedings/catalog files) offers the strongest case for making a contribution in the field.

Overall, the scholarly contribution of design scholarship is still in flux, but this survey brings into focus areas that can be improved to build the field of design and work toward the development of a theory of design scholarship. Areas which need attention include: 1) easily searchable proceedings and catalogs; 2) developing a culture of contextualizing design scholarship; 3) rigorous and standardized ways to measure design scholarship impact factor; and 4) a focus on building a cohesive body of work that results not only in exhibition, but also can be published and cited.

References

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