Design crucial to city economy
Schools seen as engine to fiscal health.
By Joel Towers

I've long believed that art and design schools are a critical component of our city's economy—not only as a talent pipeline for its rapidly growing creative sector, but also as a catalyst for innovation and entrepreneurship. This was affirmed in a recent report by the Center for an Urban Future, which outlines ways New York City can leverage this resource, something that schools such as Parsons The New School for Design are already exploring. Industries ranging from health care to technology have increasingly tapped design as a valuable framework for innovation—in fact, many of our design and technology graduates have translated their skills into startup companies. I've been encouraged that the city also has realized this potential. Parsons is fortunate to collaborate with agencies as varied as the Parks Department, the Economic Development Corp. and the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD).

The city has an impressive track record of partnering with the design community in the creation of public buildings and green spaces. The recent Department of Design and Construction Excellence program and pioneering public-private partnerships such as the Central Park Conservancy and Friends of the High Line are just two examples. Another is a new five-year partnership between Parsons and the Parks Department, which gives students in our signature design-build program, the Design Workshop, the opportunity to design and construct new public amenities. This work began last summer in Washington Heights' Highbridge Park, where we are creating a new pool pavilion

Over the past several years, Parsons has expanded offerings in service design, building on our successful program in design and management, and students and faculty are working with a number of local nonprofits to advance their missions. For example, in partnership with the Fortune Society, a nonprofit that supports the re-entry into society of the formerly incarcerated, our students created new service initiatives to foster a stronger sense of community, including a welcome kit and mentor system. Parsons is now taking this approach with city government through a partnership with HPD and the nonprofit Public Policy Lab, which will improve public services for low- and moderate-income communities through design.

The Center for an Urban Future makes a compelling and commendable case for the importance of design schools to New York City's economy. In the past year, the city has begun to more formally support the growth of the design sector, partnering with both Parsons and the Fashion Institute of Technology on new initiatives in support of the fashion industry.

But the city could go further in harnessing design education as a key engine of our economy. By expanding incubator programs for young designers such as those developed by the Pratt Institute and the Council of Fashion Designers of America, or encouraging Cornell and Technion to make design a part of the new technology campus on Roosevelt Island, elected leaders would further demonstrate their commitment to the innovation economy that continues to propel—and distinguish—our city.

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