

Creative Design

Faculty Profile

SHU's Robert Conlon Balances the Business and the Artistic Realities of Graphic Design

Robert Conlon's teaching career originally wasn't by design.

In fact, the former theology student had sketched a different plan when he moved to Chicago to study for his doctorate degree in philosophy more than a decade ago.

However, because of his background in audio and video production – and to pay some bills – he accepted a job working as an art director for a small design firm. This eventually led to a marketing manager position for the movie company Paramount Communications. Eventually, he began teaching graphic design part-time at a local college. It was there he discovered his passion for teaching.

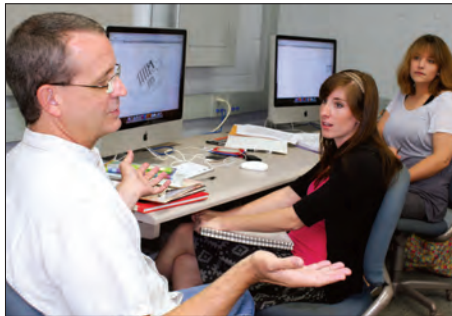
"I felt like I had found what I both loved and needed to do," Conlon said.

In 2007 Siena Heights University hired Conlon as a full-time faculty member to teach graphic design in its nationally recognized art department. At SHU, he has brought a combination of real-world practicality and artistic innovation to the classroom. Finding the right balance for each student is his goal.

"The first thing I want students to realize is that graphic design is a service," Conlon said of the "business" side of graphic design. "Students will be working for clients, and ultimately the only thing that matters is meeting the client's need."

However, he said employers also value designers' skills such as creativity and idea generation.

"I also like to make sure students don't forget they are artists," he said. "Nothing makes me happier than when a former student finances their 'art career' by working as a designer."



Conlon started in graphic design when tools like rubber cement and X-Acto knives were the norm. Now, they are primarily electronic, with computers and high-end software the industry standard.

"The tools are something that will always change, but being able to use one's creativity to generate exciting ideas is what will give someone a successful career in design," he said.

Gregg Milligan, a computer information systems major who graduated from SHU last May, completed two of Conlon's graphic design classes to help develop his creative side. These skills currently help him in his job with Human Element, a web site development company based in Ann Arbor, Mich.

"He'll give you a project, let you work on it and ask questions," Milligan said of Conlon's easygoing teaching style. "You have the freedom to expand. You're learning the material, but you're also learning to branch out and forge your own path rather than just being handed a syllabus."

Conlon said his students often have "free rein" during the creative process.

"I have a certain core of things I want students to learn," Conlon said of his teaching philosophy. "But the bottom line is, the best commodity students can take out of my classes is learning how to come up

with ideas. We are moving from the 'information age' into the 'idea age,' so finding that creativity within themselves may be the most important asset they will have for the future."

Conlon, also an accomplished musician, pushes the boundaries of his own creativity. Last fall, he taught his first animation class, and also led an experimental filmmaking class this past summer.

"Our emphasis was on good ideas rather than learning about all the technical aspects of animation," Conlon said of the animation class. "It was about pushing creativity into the realm of motion."

His students can also interact with him on Facebook, a popular Internet social media channel.

"I have a (Facebook) group for each class I teach," Conlon said. "There they can post pictures or comments and put up interesting links. It makes for more informal connections and adds some fun." ♦

Robert Conlon's easygoing teaching style (including handing out alphabet cookies during class) has endeared him to his students.

