

COLLECTIVE FORWARD

Designing Equity
Across Academia
and Industry

June 2024

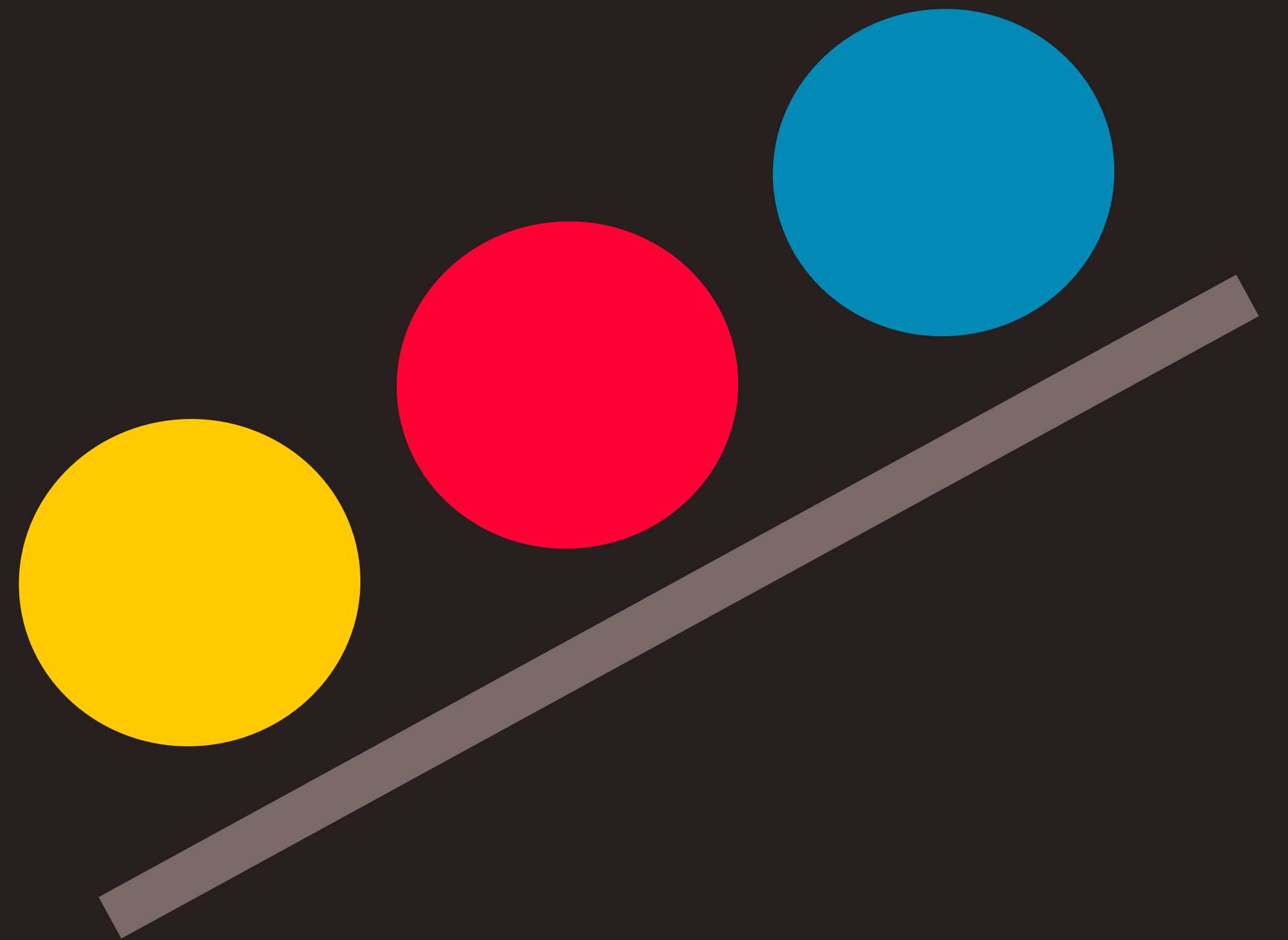
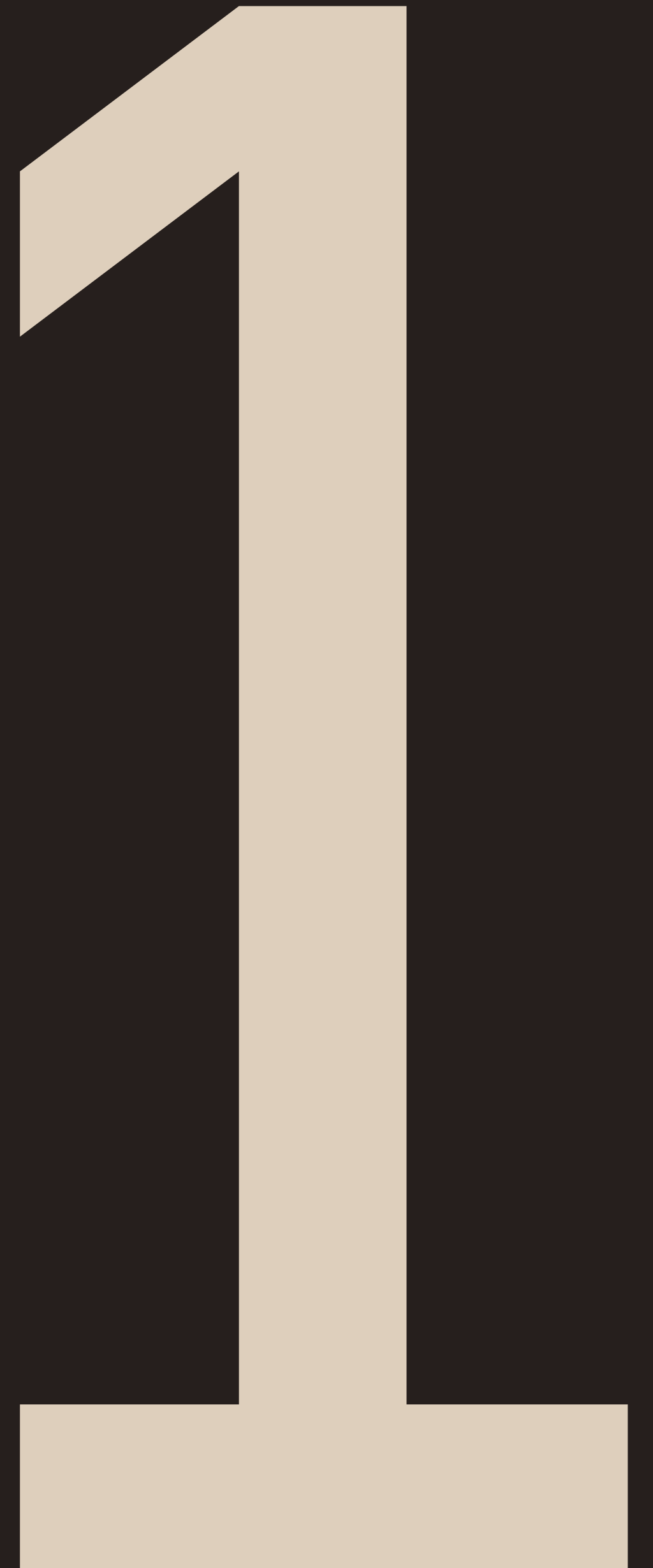
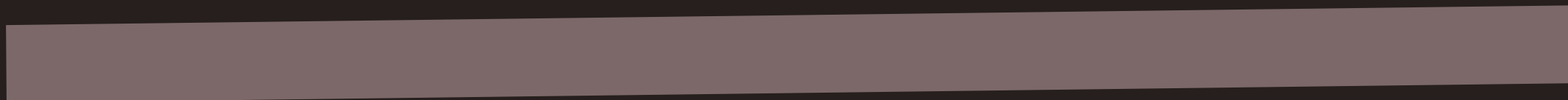
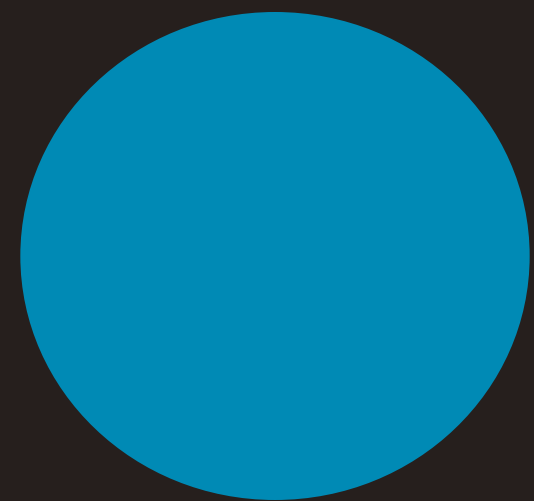


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INTRODUCTION



OPENING LETTER

This initiative stemmed from a belief that progress only comes when we collaborate —across institutions, across sectors, across geography, across backgrounds, across perspectives.

In October 2021, I participated in the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project’s Research Symposium *Learning from Arts Alumni: Supporting Careers and Addressing Inequities*. Utilizing SNAAP’s robust arts and design alumni data set, various researchers shared reports and analyses in progress on the state of the creative workforce in the US and Canada. There was a clear and troubling thread indicating that post graduate success in the creative fields is still significantly hampered by bias of all kinds —gender, race, ethnicity, ability and socio-economic. I and other leaders within AICAD felt it was imperative that higher education institutions work with industry leaders to better understand the issues at play and begin to identify ways to improve equity in the creative sector. We also knew that many were already doing this work, and our hope was to find ways to build connections among those individuals and groups as well as connect them more directly to higher education changemakers.

This report is the result of a series of conversations among a diverse group of design community participants aimed at identifying key challenges and potential approaches that could move the design community collectively forward (see more in the **Methodology** section). No group of individuals can ever be comprehensive enough to represent every perspective within a field, and I’m sure this group was missing key elements. That said, we hope that the insights that surfaced resonate in some way, inspire continued conversations in various corners of the field, and potentially move some to take action toward a better future.

While there is a full section of acknowledgements, I’d like to particularly thank The Mellon Foundation for the resources that supported this process, and Lee-Sean Huang from AIGA and Todd Palmer of Diversity in Design Collaborative for sharing in the leadership of this initiative with me. Collaboration is the key to a more equitable future, and I couldn’t have asked for better partners for this initiative.



Deborah L. Obalil

Deborah Obalil

President & Executive Director
Association of Independent
Colleges of Art & Design
(AICAD)

METHODOLOGY

Our approach to this process was to develop a conversation over a three-month period with a group of individuals experienced with and representing a broad array of perspectives on the design field. The first step was to engage two key partner organizations that were already working at the intersection of diversity and inclusion and career development within design—AIGA and Diversity in Design Collaborative.

Together we identified four categories of participants—academia, industry (a very wide-ranging category), career development and community focused practice. Not surprisingly, participants often crossed categories.

Three discussion sessions of 90 minutes each were held across the three-month time span. Notes were taken and summarized for each meeting, and meetings were recorded and shared with participants who missed a conversation to keep them in the loop and up to date. The results of each conversation shaped the format and content for the subsequent conversation. Consensus was not the goal of the process, and we worked hard to allow space for all perspectives and to not lose that diversity in the summary notes for each session, as well as for this final report.

The results shared in this document are a synthesized summary of all three conversations. Some themes and threads did emerge from the conversations, which we've aimed to capture here.

REPORT DETAILS

How to Use this Report

We’ve created this report to allow readers to both quickly get the topline thoughts, but also easily dig deeper if they desire. We know many reports can feel dense, verbose, and overwhelming, so we spread out the details of the report into small chunks, using accessible language as much as possible.

We designed it with open space to write notes. We hope readers will use portions of the report in their own work (with appropriate attribution) to build on and spread the conversation far beyond the reach of this initial group.

How to Cite This Report

Obalil, Deborah; Lee-Sean Huang and Todd Palmer. “Collective Forward: Designing Equity Across Academia and Industry” Association of Independent Colleges of Art & Design (June 2024).

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About AICAD

AICAD—the Association of Independent Colleges of Art and Design—is a non-profit consortium of the leading specialized arts and design schools in the US and Canada. Founded in 1991, the mission is to help strengthen the member colleges individually and collectively, and to inform the public about these colleges and universities and the value of studying the arts and design.

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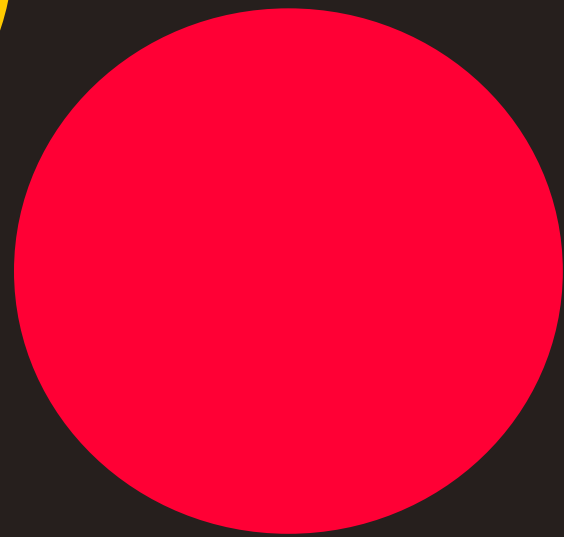
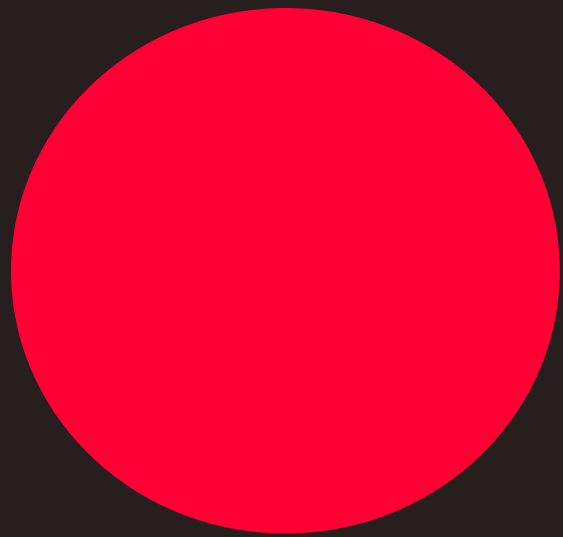
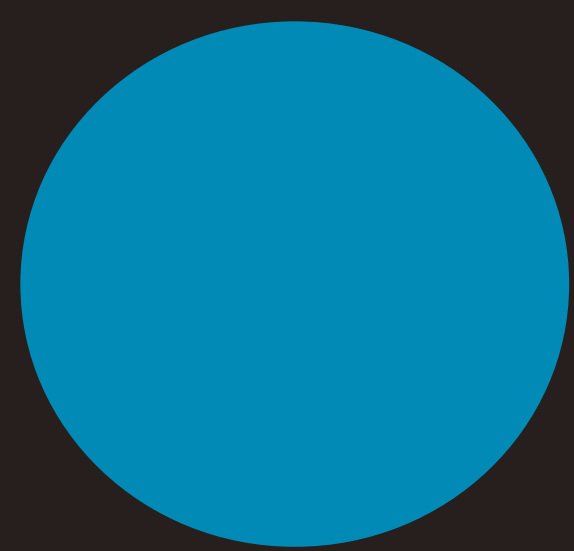
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to David Colby Reed, my partner in life and in business at Foossa. And to the AIGA community, I have learned so much with you over the years. Finally, to all of my students past and present, I appreciate your curiosity, engagement, and collaboration over the years.

—*Lee-Sean Huang*

I'd like to acknowledge the creatives I work with from emerging talent starting their careers to creative leaders who equally drive and inspire me with their passion for creativity and talent. I also give thanks to Bill Melendez, who was Charles M. Schulz animation partner responsible for bringing Charlie Brown and the Peanut Gang to life. Bill was a neighbor of my grandparents, as a child I had the honor of visiting Bill in his studio and watching him draw these iconic characters, which are the foundation of my passion for the creative arts and my career in the industry.

—*Rod Berg*

I'd like to acknowledge Dr. Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall and her book *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook* and the work of our team at the RBC Centre for Emerging Artists & Designers at OCAD U.

—*Zev Farber*

Satya de La Paz, East Bay Meditation Center, Staci Haines, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Maree Brown for helping cultivate a sustainable somatic approach to DEI and healing justice rooted in courage and community, joy and pleasure

—*Melissa Andrada*

I'd like to thank all of the mentors who have supported me in my journey as an artist, designer and educator!

—*Kelly Walters*

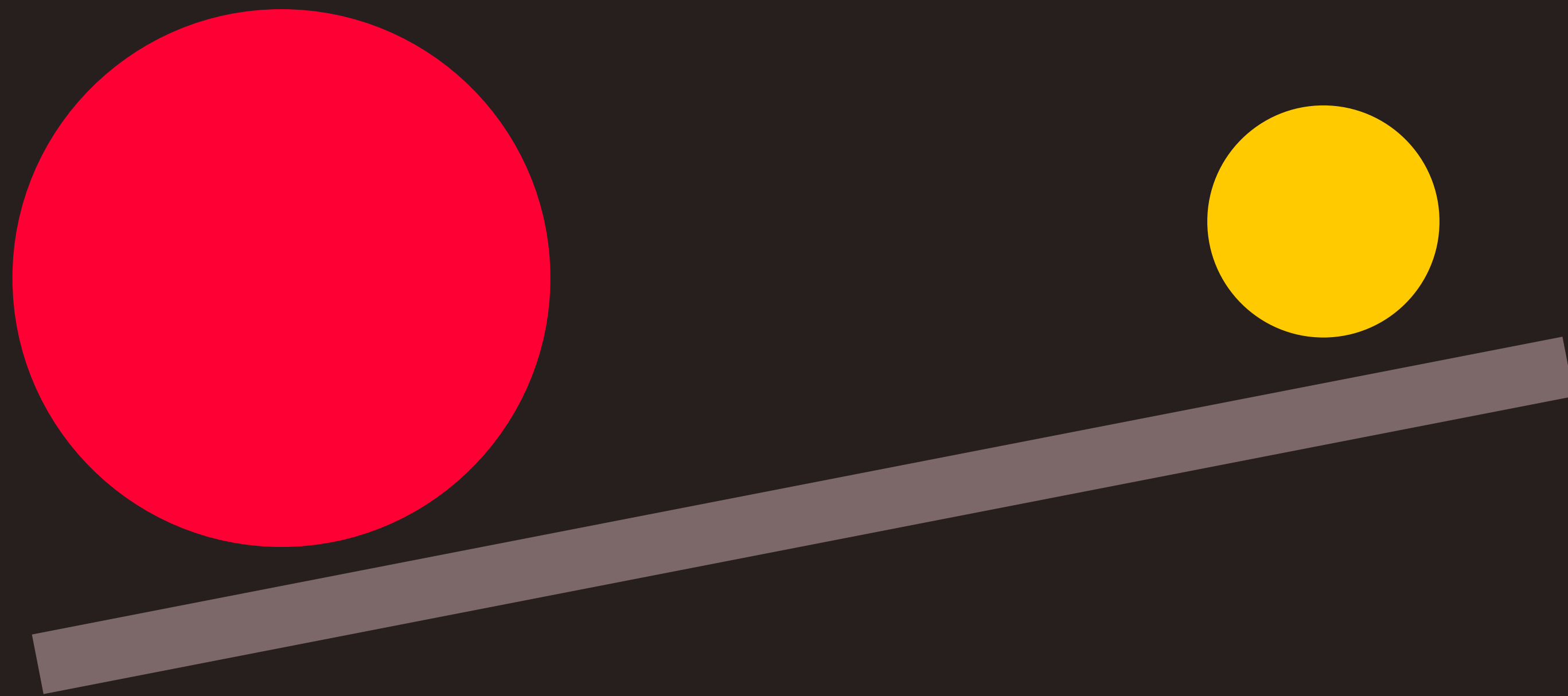
Thanks to everyone who has helped contribute to Useful School and my freelance design practice, including: Forest Young, Mitzi Okou, Terrell Griffith, Roshannah Bagley, Shakeil Greeley, Annika Hansteen-Izora, Jo Velasquez, Temi Coker, Zipeng Zhu, Dantley Davis, Catt Small, Daniele Codega, Shannon Washington, Oriel Davis-Lyons, Amy Lima, Armin Vit, Deroy Peraza, Felix Oliha, Shaun Mosley, Alan Walker, Arielle Julie, Eric Brown, Abdul Ovaice, Julian Alexander, John Ferguson, Schessa Garbut, Waqas Jawaid, Andy Chen, Zariah Cameron, Joel Arbaje, and many more.

—*Ritesh Gupta*

I give thanks to the hundred-plus individuals who have generously informed the emergence of Diversity in Design Collaborative over the last 3-odd years. The iterative and aggregated wisdom of these individuals (be they community agents, scholars, secondary school educators, high schoolers, college students, or design/other industry organizational leaders) attuned my capacity to co-facilitate the conversations behind these pages.

—*Todd Palmer*

KEY CHALLENGES AND FRICTIONS



KEY CHALLENGES AND FRICTIONS OVERVIEW

- 1** External forces
- 2** Power structures
- 3** Lack of awareness
- 4** Design is an evolving field
- 5** Industry & academia differ in strengths

1

EXTERNAL FORCES

Forces of inequity and bias are societal, and not limited to the design field. Dominant structures of capitalism don't clearly support collectivity, particularly current approaches to intellectual property.

**WHAT ROLE CAN WE PLAY
IN MITIGATING THE IMPACT
OF EXTERNAL FORCES ON
DESIGN PRACTICES?**

2

POWER STRUCTURES

Those with power in the field often want to hold on to existing power structures.
The role of decolonization in addressing how design knowledge is defined
and where it comes from is not fully understood...or embraced.

HOW CAN WE UNDO
EXISTING POWER
STRUCTURES AND
DECOLONIZE DESIGN?

3

LACK OF AWARENESS

Young people, their support networks and other future potential designers have little knowledge of the breadth of design fields and career options. Too few people understand the role of design to hold the field accountable.

HOW CAN WE ENGAGE
WITH COMMUNITIES
TO DEMYSTIFY THE
FIELD OF DESIGN?

4

INDUSTRY AND ACADEMIA DIFFER IN STRENGTHS

The design industry frequently innovates and advances without properly documenting or considering learned lessons. There is a role for academia in the capture and dissemination of knowledge.

INDUSTRY OFTEN
OUTPACES ACADEMIA.
HOW CAN WE USE THIS
TENSION PRODUCTIVELY?

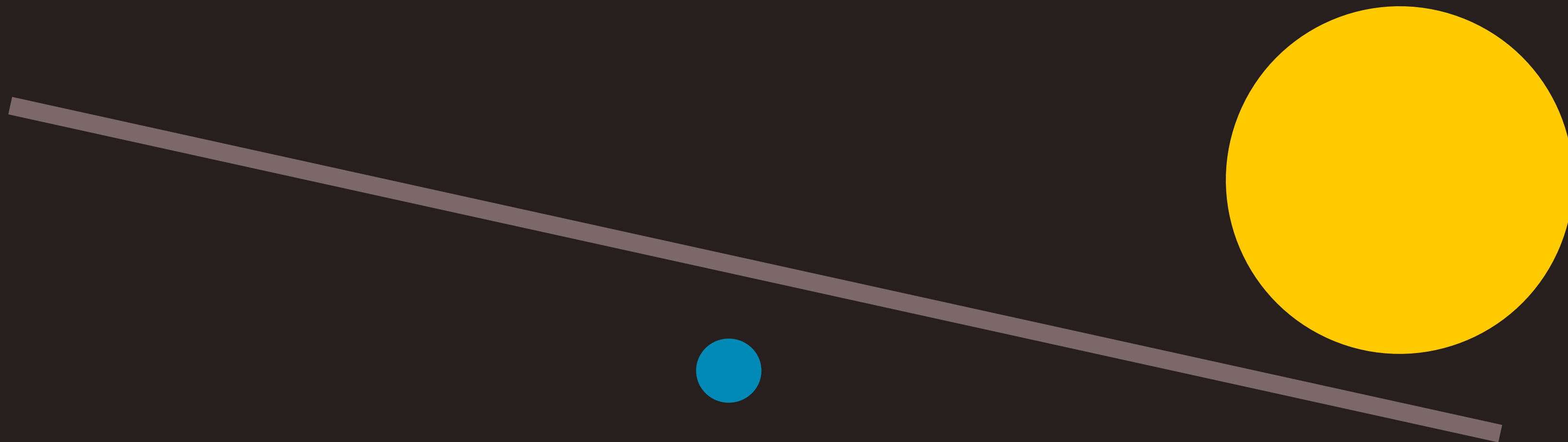
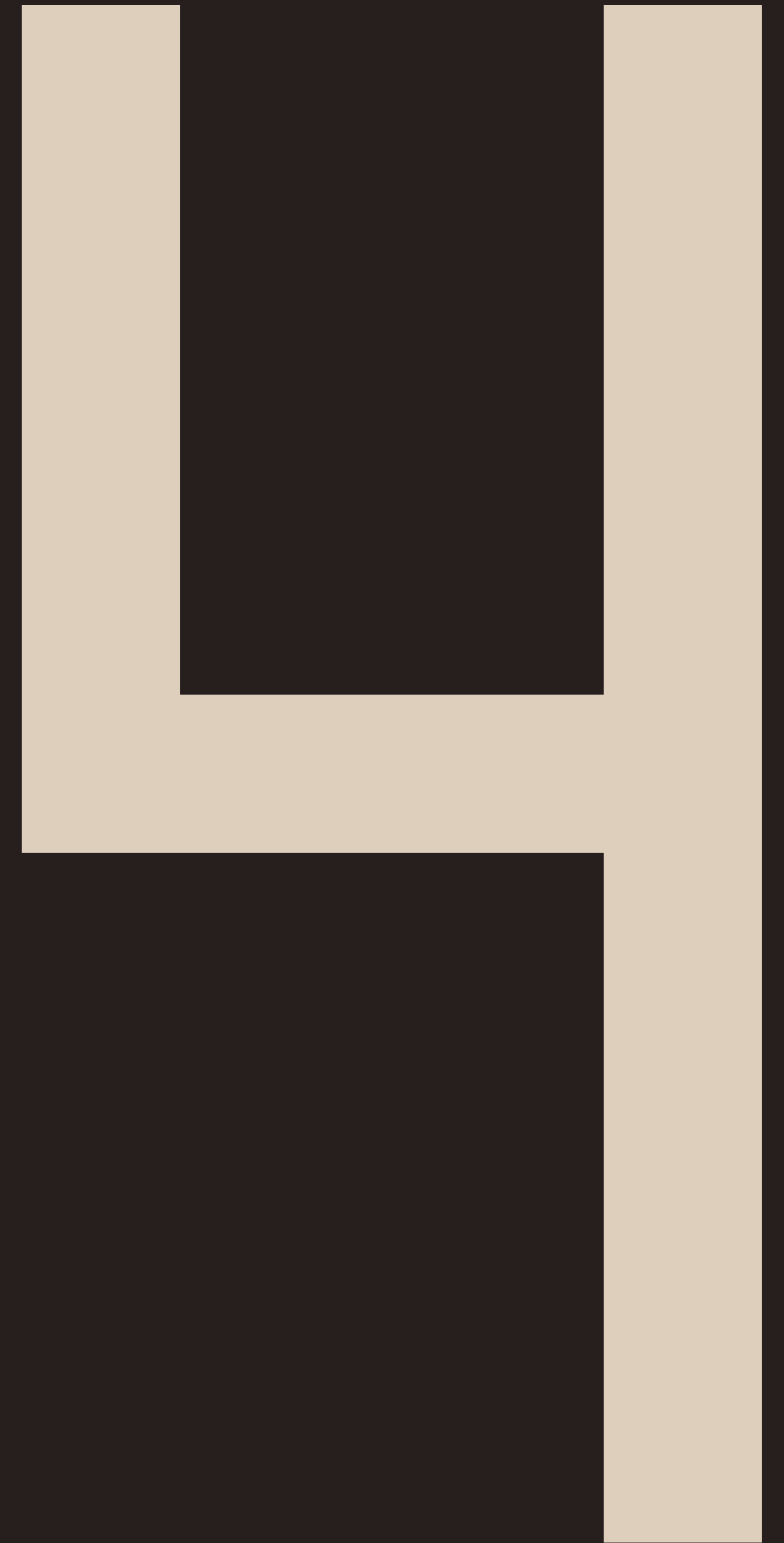
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DESIGN IS AN EVOLVING FIELD

Career trajectories constantly change, requiring updated knowledge. Designers need more support along the career spectrum to aid retention and advancement.

WHAT RESOURCES HELP
DESIGNERS STAY
UPDATED WITH CAREER
DEMANDS?

LEVERS FOR CHANGE



LEVERS FOR CHANGE OVERVIEW

- 1** Center community
- 2** Innovate peer-to-peer resources
- 3** Evolve design education for lifelong learning

1ST LEVER FOR CHANGE

CENTER COMMUNITY



- 1** Embrace the ecosystem
- 2** Redistribute power
- 3** Advocate collectively
- 4** Innovate accessibly
- 5** Align skillsets

1

EMBRACE THE ECOSYSTEM

Recognize the design community constitutes an ecosystem across existing organizations and individuals, with space for new voices.

2

REDISTRIBUTE POWER

Aggregate the power of designers across existing networks.

Be sure to include design “initiates” as accomplices.

Invite leaders to participate as allies, not as deciders.

3

ADVOCATE COLLECTIVELY

Elevate a collective voice for designers (e.g. SAG / AFTRA, WGA, and other creative unions) that can organize across organizations, advocating for the value of design labor.

4

INNOVATE ACCESSIBLY

Support industry innovation with accessible documentation and learning that directly feeds design scholarship, enhancing both learning and innovation.

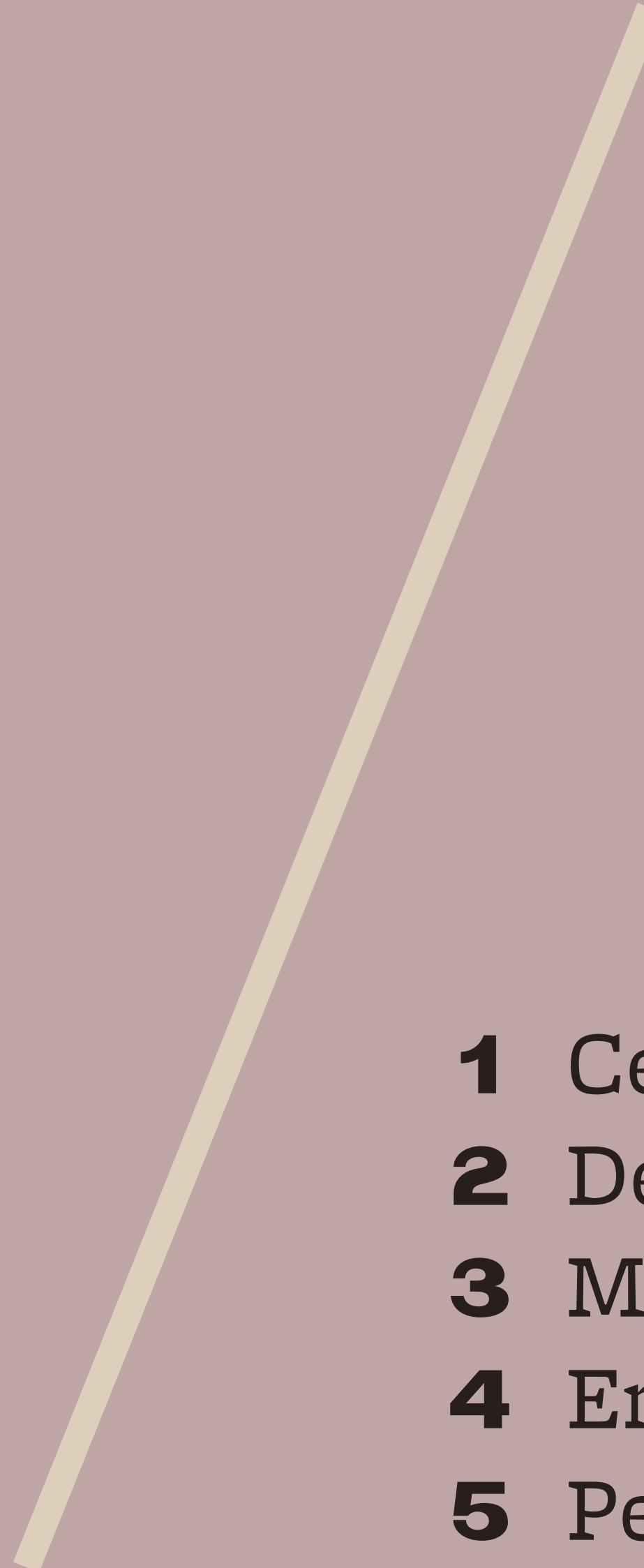
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ALIGN SKILLSETS

Create reciprocal communication between academic and industry to better align design skillsets.

2ND LEVER FOR CHANGE

INNOVATE PEER TO PEER RESOURCES

- 
- 1** Center values
 - 2** Decolonize approaches
 - 3** Map the pathways
 - 4** Empower POVs
 - 5** Personalize coaching

1

CENTER VALUES

Center tools that help designers build sustainable practices and show up fully as themselves, grounded in their values.

2

DECOLONIZE APPROACHES

Prioritize decolonized and decarbonized approaches so that design can contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

3

MAP THE PATHWAYS

Address knowledge gaps and illustrate career roadmaps
that are useful across stages of development
—from exploratory to early and mid-career to leadership.

4

EMPOWER POVS

Empower inclusive career perspectives.

Provide individualized career progression activities,
including internships, apprenticeships, coaching, and upskilling.

5

PERSONALIZE COACHING

Upskill people through highly personalized coaching,
inclusive of many career paths and perspectives.

3RD LEVER FOR CHANGE

EVOLVE DESIGN EDUCATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING



- 1** Map out resources
- 2** Bridge knowledge
- 3** Diversify learning
- 4** Align pace and rigor
- 5** Rethink IP

1

MAP OUT RESOURCES

Create and expand trans-generational resources for everyone, including industry leaders (especially non-design leaders) and newcomers to design. These resources should include decolonization, embodied design and other emergent paths.

2

BRIDGE KNOWLEDGE

Address the knowledge gaps between learners and industry in developing design field resources, recognizing learning needs on both sides.

3

DIVERSIFY LEARNING

Recognize no one approach to education / learning
will fulfill all needs as ongoing learning is critical.

4

ALIGN PACE AND RIGOR

Explore ways to combine the innovation pace of industry with greater documentation rigor through partnerships with academia. This would contribute to greater reciprocal learning and evolution of design.

5

RETHINK IP

Rethink approaches to intellectual property that shift from individual ownership to collective models.

SUMMARY



5

KEY CHALLENGES AND FRICTIONS OVERVIEW

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- 2** Power structures
- 3** Lack of awareness
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KEY CHALLENGES AND FRICTIONS

1

External forces

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Power structures

Those with power in the field often want to hold on to existing power structures The role of decolonization in addressing how design knowledge is defined and where it comes from is not fully understood or embraced.

3

Lack of awareness

Young people, their support networks and other future potential designers have little knowledge of the breadth of design fields and career options. Too few people understand the role of design to hold the field accountable.

4

Design is an evolving field

Career trajectories constantly change, requiring updated knowledge. Designers need more support along the career spectrum to aid retention and advancement.

5

Industry & academia differ in strengths

The design industry frequently innovates and advances without properly documenting or considering learned lessons. There is a role for academia in the capture and dissemination of knowledge.

LEVERS FOR CHANGE OVERVIEW

- 1** Center community
- 2** Innovate peer-to-peer resources
- 3** Evolve design education for lifelong learning

CENTER COMMUNITY

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Embrace the ecosystem

Recognize the design community constitutes an ecosystem across existing organizations and individuals, with space for new voices.

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Aggregate the power of designers across existing networks. Be sure to include design “initiates” as accomplices. Invite leaders to participate as allies, not as deciders.

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Advocate collectively

Elevate a collective voice for designers (e.g. SAG / AFTRA, WGA, and other creative unions) that can organize across organizations, advocating for the value of design labor.

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Innovate accessibly

Support industry innovation with accessible documentation and learning that directly feeds design scholarship, enhancing both learning and innovation.

5

Align skillsets

Create reciprocal communication between academic and industry to better align design skillsets.

INNOVATE PEER TO PEER RESOURCES

1

Center values

Center tools that help designers build sustainable practices and show up fully as themselves, grounded in their values.

2

Decolonize approaches

Prioritize decolonized and decarbonized approaches so that design can contribute to a more equitable and sustainable future.

3

Map the pathways

Address the knowledge gaps between learners and industry in developing design field resources, recognizing learning needs on both sides.

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Empower POVs

Empower inclusive career perspectives. Provide individualized career progression activities, including internships, apprenticeships, coaching, and upskilling.

5

Personalize coaching

Upskill people through highly personalized coaching, inclusive of many career paths and perspectives.

EVOLVE DESIGN EDUCATION FOR LIFELONG LEARNING

1

Map out resources

Create and expand resources for everyone, including industry leaders (especially non-design leaders) and newcomers to design. These trans-generational resources should include decolonization, embodied design and other emergent paths.

2

Bridge knowledge

Address the knowledge gaps between learners and industry (including on the side of industry - learning is manifest holistically and reciprocally) in developing design field resources.

3

Diversify learning

Recognize no one approach to education / learning will fulfill all needs as ongoing learning is critical.

4

Align pace and rigor

Explore ways to combine the innovation pace of industry with greater documentation rigor through partnerships with academia. This would contribute to greater reciprocal learning and evolution of design.

5

Rethink IP

Rethink approaches to intellectual property that shift from individual ownership to collective models.

THANK YOU

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