

11-2007

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Liberty University

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### Recommended Citation

Liberty University, "New Visual Communication Arts program paints picture of growth" (2007). *November/December 2007*. Paper 25. [http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj\\_2007\\_nov/25](http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/lj_2007_nov/25)

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## **New Visual Communication Arts program paints picture of growth**

December 20, 2007 | Mitzi Bible

When Todd Smith works on an art project, time stands still.

Like the night his wife came home from her job on third shift and it surprised him; he had been hard at work on a sculpture all night and didn't even know it was the morning. Or the night he stayed up with his young sons, way past their bedtime, working on a piece of art he would demonstrate in his class the following day.

Now Smith's dedication to art has led him — and Liberty University — to the new Visual Communication Arts (VCAR) Degree in the School of Communication.

Smith is the program's director.

The VCAR degree was made available in the fall of 2006. It started with 150 students and in one year has doubled, with about 300 declared majors. The program had its foundation in the existing Communication Studies program.

Students can choose concentrations in Graphic Design or Studio Art, with 45 credit hours required. Minors are also offered. Classes range from the cutting-edge subjects of desktop publishing, digital imaging and 2D/3D animation, to the traditional arts of painting, drawing and sculpture. Smith said the program is an answer to prayer.

“When we first started getting word out about this degree, parents (who knew their children were artistic) would call me and say, ‘We have prayed for years that God would bring an art degree to Liberty.’ It amazed me. Parents were praying that because they wanted their child to go to an art school that was within a Christian framework.”

Associate professor Stacy Vance, who teaches courses in graphic design, said the VCAR program is “an amazing void that Liberty is able to fill.”

“Having an art program in a Christian school is probably something that is long overdue,” she said. “The fact that we are able to train Christian artists is an amazing ministry opportunity. Of course we want to be able to grow and send those people out.”

Vance said the skill level of students is impressive: “The raw talent we get in some of the earlier classes is amazing.”

Smith said feedback from students was a factor in getting the program up and running. Some input, he said, came from former Communication Studies students who had already ventured out into those fields.

“We would get input from them: ‘You need to teach more art, or you need to have more design classes,’” he said.

Though just one year old, the program has already seen its first graduate. Olivia Fryer graduated in the spring (she had enough electives in the old Communication/graphics degree — and did some online work — to complete the VCAR degree). Now she works on graphic design for a Cincinnati, Ohio, marketing firm.

She said the VCAR degree “definitely qualified me for the job I have now,” and it was just what she had been looking for at Liberty.

“I was really excited because [the lack of an art degree] was one thing when I had decided to come to Liberty I was kind of disappointed about. It was kind of neat that I found out they even had graphic design in the Communication Department.”

The VCAR program has seven full-time and two adjunct faculty members. Smith said he feels “fortunate to have the caliber teachers that we have.” He said the professors are all “active” artists, continuing their craft outside the classroom.

“They all have years of industry experience, which makes a huge difference,” Smith said. “If you know the field, you come to teach students, and you stay abreast of the field, the students are going to benefit.”

VCAR students also get a chance to stay active outside of the classroom — even before they graduate. Students are required to participate in internships at area art venues and businesses that do work in graphic design.

“What we’re trying to do is to get students who come through this degree to go into every facet of the art world,” Smith said. “Just like Dr. Falwell used to say, ‘You need to be salt and light.’ For a long time, Christians have not been salt and light in the field of art.”

Students also have extracurricular groups they can join on campus, including the Studio Art Community (a guild for artistic expression), Kappa Pi International Art Honor Society and a campus chapter of the American Institute of Graphic Arts. And, in the spring, they can enter their work in a juried student art show sponsored by the VCAR program. A faculty art show is also being planned.

Smith said making the VCAR degree a reality took hard work by a team of people, including the administration in the School of Communication.

“They have been so supportive, for example, giving us new equipment, remodeled facilities and curriculum support,” Smith said.

And there’s more work to do because the vision doesn’t stop with offering a degree, Smith said. He hopes someday to add education certification. Associate professor Eva Palmer, who teaches drawing and painting, said her classes are cramped now, but she is excited about the program’s growth.

“I believe that as more and more people across the country find out about our program, we are just going to explode around here in the arts ... we will be inundated with students so we are going to have to have space.”

Palmer has specialized in ceramics and would like to teach pottery. The program has three pottery wheels and a small-size kiln, but they are sitting in storage until there is studio space available.

“At the rate we’re growing,” she said, “it would be wonderful to have a fine arts building.”