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Lessons from Transition Design Contribution to GTI Forum [The Pedagogy of Transition](#)

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My contribution is brief and concerns the experience of trying to embed sustainability into a design program in a large research university in the US.

In 2009, I joined Carnegie Mellon University as the Head of the School of Design to lead the redesign of programs at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels. My goal was to place what our discipline calls "design for society and the environment" at the heart of all programs. That process was chronicled in a 2015 article I wrote for *Solutions Journal* called "[Redesigning a Design Program: How Carnegie Mellon University is Developing a Design Curricula for the 21st Century.](#)" With the hindsight of six years, we know that some things we tried worked, while others did not. Among the things I feel were pivotal in shifting both culture and curricula were the following:

1. **An inclusive, co-design process:** Engaging the entire faculty in an 18-month long visioning and co-design process whose objective was not only embedding sustainability into programs but also ensuring that those faculty who did *not* immediately embrace the objective should still have a key role to play. This strategy resulted in several people transitioning at their own pace over the course of several years, and those early voices of dissent raised many important points that later proved to be valuable.
2. **Developing a set of Eco-readers for the School:** These were patterned after Berkeley professor Arnold Shultz's [Ecosystemology reader](#). Gideon Kossoff, who had been the long-time librarian at Schumacher College and coordinator of their MSc in Holistic Science, created the reader and brought sensibilities from Schumacher College, social ecology, and several other

green activism strands to the collection. We wrote commentary to supplement the readings that framed them within the discipline of design. Faculty were able to reference the collection in order to integrate principles into their coursework and projects, and it became a valuable resource for a new “design studies” strand in the undergraduate curriculum which familiarized students with a range of topics, including ecology, living systems theory, social ecology, sustainability, commoning, and a new area founded at the School called Transition Design.

3. Launch of Transition Design as a new area of research/study/practice: The new curricula established Transition Design as one of three key areas of focus: Service Design (as practiced within existing socio-economic paradigms), Design for Social Innovation (which challenges existing paradigms), and [Transition Design](#) (which calls for the re-conception of these paradigms). A [doctoral degree in Transition Design](#) was launched in 2015 with a taught year in which students from diverse backgrounds study the dynamics of systems transitions and develop tools and approaches for igniting positive, systems-level change. In particular, the approach argues that addressing [wicked problems](#) (systems problems) is a strategy for shifting our current unsustainable transition trajectories. A new module we have added to this semester’s course looks at the different dimensions of [social relations](#) that give rise to complex problems and keep them intractable. The Transition Design Seminar for master’s and PhD students at the school is an open-source website and is now being used by more than twenty universities (across many disciplines) around the world in several disciplines.

4. Educating the next generation of faculty in sustainability: In summer 2011, we invested in sending the next generation of tenured faculty on a learning exchange with Schumacher College. For several days, Schumacher faculty mentored CMU faculty on topics such as Gaia Theory, living systems principles, and chaos and complexity theories. My faculty spent time in conversation with Satish Kumar and Stephan Harding, participated in college life (cooking, cleaning, gardening), and took hikes on the moor as part of Harding’s “deep time walk.” CMU faculty, in turn, taught “design thinking” to their Schumacher counterparts who were, at the time, aspiring to launch a master’s program in Ecological Design Thinking. The CMU faculty who participated in that exchange described undergoing profound change on many levels. I stepped down as the Head of School in 2019, and those same faculty now lead the School of Design and have continued to transform the

culture toward our original goal. The majority of projects on which students are working at all levels of the curriculum now have some sustainability component in them, and the systems principles upon which Transition Design is based are now being taught to first-year undergraduate students.

There is much work still to be done, but the fact that we managed to ignite a positive culture change within a department within a mainstream research university in the US continues to give me hope.

In fall of 2021, Gideon Kossoff and I will formally launch a Transition Design Institute at Carnegie Mellon University and hope to constitute an international network of partners working to extend the discourse and most important develop tangible tools and approach for transdisciplinary teams working to address complex, wicked problems. We have also been delivering online workshops and short courses to a wide variety of people including faculty and deans at several universities and business schools, as well as several companies such as Microsoft.

Even though our work is firmly rooted in the transition movement (Kossoff and I were living in Totnes and attended the first Transition Town meeting Rob Hopkins convened), we feel that the leverage point for change is also teaching systems thinking and helping people to understand the systems dynamics at work in wicked problems.

About the Author



Terry Irwin is the Director of the Transition Design Institute at the Carnegie Mellon School of Design. As Head of the School of Design from 2009 to 2019, she led the project to integrate design for society and the environment into curricula at the undergraduate, masters and doctoral level. With Gideon Kossoff and Cameron Tonkinwise, she created and launched Transition Design and helped to establish a PhD program in the subject. She has held faculty positions at California College of Arts, the Otis College of Art and Design, and the University of Dundee and was a founding partner of the international design firm MetaDesign. She has an MFA from the Basel School of Design.

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