

Department of Arts,
Culture & Media

Chantal Fischzang
Assistant Professor
chantal.fischzang@rutgers.edu

Express Newark
Room, HAH-216

Office hours:
By appointment

Department Chair:
Ned Drew

Course pre-requisites:
As specified by major sequence

*This course is a Graphic Design
BFA requirement.

Design Consortium

SOCIALLY ENGAGED & COLLABORATIVE DESIGN: STRATEGIES FOR CIVIC IMPACT

“By enhancing the cultural value of the City’s creative and economic life through collaboration, education, community inclusion, and innovation, residents and local businesses will benefit from a new vision for the area defined by arts, culture, equity, and sustainability; attracting more investment and liveable communities. The key is to ensure that the District serves Newark residents first, both as a center of fun and economic opportunity.”

Mayor Ras Baraka

*MAYOR BARAKA RE-NAMES WASHINGTON PARK AFTER HARRIET TUBMAN
AND LAUNCHES ARTS AND EDUCATION DISTRICT AT THE PARK
newarknj.gov*

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COURSE INTRODUCTION

The Design Consortium (DC) is a student–faculty creative studio grounded in a collaboratively engaged design process. Within this framework, design faculty and students partner with community residents, organizations, educational institutions, and local activists to pursue shared communication and public engagement goals. The traditional notion of designers “serving” clients is replaced by a model of equal partnership, where meaningful impact emerges only through collective collaboration. This inclusive approach recognizes that each participant brings essential knowledge that makes the work and shared goals possible. This framework is integrated into the Graphic Design curriculum housed at Express Newark.

Design students collaborate with faculty to examine partners’ communication needs and challenges, develop responsive strategies, and propose design approaches for implementation.

SPRING 2026

This semester, the DC is partnering with **FOCUS Hispanic Center for Community Development** in Newark. FOCUS empowers Hispanic community members by providing innovative, high-quality services to a diverse range of constituencies. Through this partnership, DC will support FOCUS in expanding its reach and strengthening its organizational sustainability.

Working collaboratively, the DC team will help FOCUS clarify and communicate the full scope of services it offers — both to the community and to potential funders. Projects may include an updated identity system, refreshed presentation materials, and a more structured website that highlights FOCUS’s programs and services clearly and effectively. The goal is to help FOCUS broaden community awareness, improve access to services, and enhance its capacity to secure funding and financial independence.

This partnership aligns with FOCUS’s mission to collaborate with other organizations and strengthen existing synergies, ensuring the best possible services for the communities they serve.

BIO

FOCUS, is a non-profit organization 501c3 located in Newark, New Jersey. FOCUS, a social services agency, provides community social services and human development services to Essex County residents. Committed to improving the effectiveness of its communities and improving the quality of life for the City of Newark and the Essex County residents FOCUS provides the unique opportunities for individuals and families in the community to succeed and become self-sufficient.

FOCUS primarily serves the Hispanic population of Newark. New Jersey itself has the seventh largest Latino or Hispanic heritage population in the nation with roughly 1.7 million of Hispanic ethnicity (3.1% of the entire United States). New Jersey’s Hispanic population is 19% of the state’s population, making it the eighth largest statewide population nationally. Clients served by FOCUS adult and human development programs, and children and family services are 48% Hispanic, 42% African-American heritage, 9% Caucasian and 1% as “other ethnic” heritage.

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CONSIDERATIONS

This work will touch on eight critical considerations:

- (1) Information Hierarchy: Clarity & Simplicity
- (2) Intuitive Consistency with Visual Systems
- (3) Visibility: Discoverability & Outreach
- (4) Regulations & Standards: Nonprofit/Legal Standards
- (5) Universal Accessibility
- (6) Cultural Sensitivity
- (7) Maintenance: Organization's sustained upkeep
- (8) Political Climate & Community Trust

OBJECTIVES + DELIVERABLES

Design Consortium students will partner with Focus leadership to define communication strategies and deliverables that address organizational challenges. The course centers the strategy-building process as a shared design outcome, promoting knowledge exchange, adaptability, and long-term value for Focus.

All work will support the organization's goals to broaden community awareness, improve access to services, and strengthen capacity for funding and financial independence, while advancing students' skills in communication design, strategic thinking, and community-engaged practice.

COURSE FORMAT / PHASES**Notice / Connect / Discover** [Weeks 1–3]

This phase emphasizes relationship-building and context-setting through learning materials, site visits, and community engagement. Students conduct ethnographic, historical, and contextual research, including interviews with stakeholders, to understand Focus' mission, values, audiences, and the broader social landscape shaping their communication challenges.

Define / Strategize [Weeks 4–6]

Working collaboratively with Focus leadership and stakeholders, students synthesize research insights to define core communication challenges and articulate strategic goals. Activities include comparative and precedent analysis, ideation workshops, and strategy exchanges that surface opportunities for inclusive, effective, and sustainable design approaches.

Design / Offer [Weeks 7–10]

Students advance and refine design concepts that respond to defined communication goals. This phase emphasizes iterative design methods, prototyping, and presentations to Focus leadership and community stakeholders. Ongoing feedback and refinement ensure solutions are grounded in partner needs and aligned with organizational priorities.

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Produce / Deliver [Weeks 11–13]

Students finalize selected design outcomes and prepare materials for production and delivery. This phase includes revisions, production planning, file preparation, packaging of final documents, and presentation of deliverables. Students also reflect on the process and assess the impact and applicability of their work for Focus' ongoing communication efforts.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Engage in socially-engaged design research that extends beyond the classroom and contributes to the Newark community.
2. Apply equity-centered, inclusive, and ethical design practices, recognizing power and privilege, and critically evaluating the challenges and responsibilities of designing with and for communities.
3. Conduct and synthesize field research methods — including interviews, observation, and collaborative dialogue — to inform context-aware and ethical design outcomes.
4. Co-create original, appropriate, and impactful communication design approaches through partnership-based, professional processes.
5. Articulate and share design decision-making — including empathy-building, problem framing, research interpretation, and strategy development — with partners + peers.
6. Collaborate effectively with peers and community partners, contributing meaningfully as both an individual designer and a member of a diverse team.
7. Manage individual responsibilities within complex design systems, supporting collaborative workflows and shared outcomes.
8. Maintain high technical and professional standards, critically evaluating both personal and collective design work.

PROCESS QUESTIONS**Message & Goals**

What is the main message we want to communicate?

What are the goals of this project for Focus, their constituents, and the Newark community?

What story or experience do we want to create and share?

Community & Stakeholders

Who is the community or audience? Who are the stakeholders and users?

What do they know, feel, think, and need?

How can we understand their perspectives and priorities through collaboration?

Research & Narrative Development

What information and insights can we collect to shape our narrative?

Who should be involved in shaping the story with us?

Whose voices need to be visible, and what stories deserve attention?

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Designing the Experience

How can we design a participatory experience where the process itself communicates meaning?
How do we ensure the design is engaging, reflective, and inclusive of community input?

Equity & Inclusion

What strategies will ensure diverse voices are included and participants feel represented and heard?
How can design decisions uphold accessibility, empowerment, and ethical responsibility?

Usability & Functionality

How will issues of usability, accessibility, representation, interactivity, and navigation be addressed?
How do these considerations shape the final experience for both the community and organizational goals?

CLASS FORMAT

This class operates as a professional design studio grounded in collaboration. We will meet during class hours for team-based work and connect with Focus partners through in-person meetings and digital platforms. Each student is responsible for contributing both independently and collaboratively, with accountability, ownership, and recognition shared equally across the team. The course emphasizes iterative design, reflection, and professional rigor, with both the process and final outcomes central to learning.

MATERIALS

Students should bring materials for sketching and idea generation to every class session, as well as a device for backing up work to a location other than their computer (e.g., portable drive or cloud storage). Each student must maintain a sketchbook throughout the semester to document their process — ideas, drawings, notes, and reflections. Process work will be reviewed periodically and submitted along with final deliverables at the end of the semester.

REQUIRED READING

Readings will be assigned over the course of the semester, and will be posted to our class site. acmgd.info/dc

DIGITAL POLICY

Each student is responsible for backing up their own digital files, even when working on shared or collaborative documents. File corruption, loss, or computer failure will not be accepted as an excuse for missed deadlines. Students should consistently back up their work on multiple devices or cloud platforms to ensure their contributions are preserved and accessible throughout the semester.

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PREPARATION FOR CLASS

Students are expected to arrive prepared for each class with assigned work and materials, including sketches and comps in the required form for critiques. Those who do not participate in class critiques or scheduled discussions should not expect private reviews later. Students are responsible for maintaining knowledge of previously covered tools, materials, and methods. If absent, students must obtain notes and assignments from classmates before the next class. While the instructor can clarify material as needed, lectures and project instructions will not be repeated individually. Students should first seek general information from peers; for further questions, the instructor's email is provided on the handout.

DEADLINES

This course is structured to allow all work to be completed within a normal semester, following real-world deadlines. Completion of all projects is mandatory to pass the course; no incomplete grades will be given without a serious, documented excuse. Projects must be submitted by the assigned deadline; late submissions will automatically receive one grade lower and must be turned in by the start of the next class. Projects may be further developed and refined after the initial submission for the final review, with the final grade calculated as the average of the original and revised work.

ATTENDANCE

Consistent and prompt attendance develops professional responsibility and ensures students have access to the full range of experiences, information, and skills necessary to complete assignments and succeed in the course. Attendance is required during scheduled class periods, and students are expected to arrive on time, use the full studio period effectively, and participate fully in all assigned activities.

Only two excused absences are allowed per semester, intended to accommodate illness. Prolonged illness should be verified by a physician and may require withdrawal if the student cannot complete work in a timely and comprehensive manner. Unsatisfactory attendance may result in a failing grade.

Lateness, early departures, excessive breaks, lack of participation, or missing homework will count toward absences (2 incidents = 1 absence). Lateness is defined as arriving more than ten minutes late or leaving before class is formally dismissed. Lateness exceeding one hour counts as one absence. More than two unexcused absences will result in a one-letter grade reduction of the final grade, unless accompanied by documentation from a physician or pre-arranged excuse.

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EVALUATION AND ASSESSMENT

Throughout the semester we will use a combination of formative assessment (discussion and critique) leading to summative evaluation (a grade). You are expected to play an active role in this process. Final grades will be determined using the following criteria:

Process & Realization: The quality of your design process, including...

- + Quality of Research
- + Conceptual Strength
- + Conceptual Development (sketches, roughs, drafts)
- + Attention to Detail / Craft / Presentation of Work
- + Syntactic Quality of Work (form, composition, interactivity)
- + Semantic Quality of Work (message, communication)
- + Pragmatic Quality of Work (function)
- + Successful completion of all Final Deliverables

Professionalism: Your role as a member of the studio and conduct, including...

- + Participation in Critiques / Discussions
- + Written Articulation
- + Verbal Articulation
- + Overall Attitude
- + Class Attendance / Punctuality
- + Deadlines / Class Preparation
- + Respect for your work and the work of others
- + Meeting Objectives of Assignments
- + Mastery of the objectives of the course
- + Motivation

GRADING

This course follows the grading system established by the University:

- A Excellent without exception.
- B+ Well above average
- B Above average
- C+ Average
- C Satisfactory
- D Poor
- F Failure
- INC Incomplete

A grade of incomplete may be given if due to non-academic reasons the student finds it impossible to complete all assignments. If a student wishes to receive an incomplete for a course, they must request it in writing no later than the last scheduled meeting for the course. Failure to meet this deadline will result in a failing grade for the course.

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HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THIS CLASS

- Self-advocate. If you do not understand something or need help, communicate with your project advisors and classmates. This is part of building a collaborative learning community.
- Set goals. Establish individual milestones and meet shared class deadlines/expectations.
- Be flexible. Approach problems with adaptability and openness to multiple solutions.
- Develop project management skills. Create organizational strategies for your work, or seek support to build these skills if needed.
- Collaborate and support peers. Share your knowledge and skills to help others progress, and be open to receiving help in return.
- Give constructive critique. Provide specific, generous, and honest feedback.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

As an academic community dedicated to the creation, dissemination, and application of knowledge, Rutgers University is committed to fostering an intellectual and ethical environment based on the principles of academic integrity. Academic integrity is essential to the success of the University's educational and research missions, and violations of academic integrity constitute serious offenses against the entire academic community.

The entire Academic Integrity Policy can be found here:

academicintegrity.rutgers.edu/academic-integrity-policy

ACCOMMODATION AND SUPPORT

Rutgers University-Newark (RU-N) is committed to the creation of an inclusive and safe learning environment for all students and the University as a whole. RU-N has identified the following resources to further its mission of access and support:

For Individuals Experiencing Disability: The Office of Disability Services (ODS) works with students with medical, physical, and/or mental conditions who encounter disabling barriers to determine reasonable and appropriate accommodations for access. Students who have completed the process with ODS and have approved accommodations are provided a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) specific to each course. To initiate accommodations for their course students must both provide the LOA and have a conversation with the course instructor about the accommodations. This should occur as early in the semester as possible. More information can be found at the RU-N ODS website (ods.newark.rutgers.edu). Contact ODS at (973) 353-5375 or via email at ods@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals who are Pregnant: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance is available to assist with any concerns or potential accommodations related to pregnancy. Students may contact the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance at (973) 353-5063 or via email at TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu.

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For Short-term Absence Verification: The Office of the Dean of Students can help with absences related to religious observance, emergency or unavoidable conflict (illness, personal or family emergency, etc.). Students should refer to University Policy 10.2.7 for information about expectations and responsibilities.

The Office of the Dean of Students can be contacted by calling (973) 353-5063 or emailing deanofstudents@newark.rutgers.edu.

For Individuals with temporary conditions/injuries: The Office of the Dean of Students can assist students who are experiencing a temporary condition or injury (broken or sprained limbs, concussions, recovery from surgery, etc.).

Students experiencing a temporary condition or injury should submit a request using the following link: <https://temporaryconditions.rutgers.edu>.

For Gender or Sex-Based Discrimination or Harassment: The Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance can assist students who are experiencing any form of gender or sex-based discrimination or harassment, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, relationship violence, or stalking. Students can report an incident to the Office of Title IX and ADA Compliance by calling (973) 353-1906 or emailing TitleIX@newark.rutgers.edu. Incidents may also be reported by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNReportingForm. For more information, students should refer to the University's Title IX Policy and Grievance Procedures located at <https://uec.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/60-1-33-current-1.pdf>

For support related to Interpersonal Violence: The Office for Violence Prevention and Victim Assistance (VPVA) can provide any student with confidential support. VPVA is a confidential resource and does not have a reporting obligation to Title IX. Students can call the office at (973) 353-1918 or email run.vpva@rutgers.edu. VPVA also maintains a confidential text-based helpline available to students; students can text (973) 339-0734 for support. Students do not need to be a victim/survivor of violence to receive assistance; any student can receive services, information, and support.

LEARNING RESOURCES

Rutgers Learning Center (tutoring services)

Room 140, Bradley Hall
(973) 353-5608
<https://sasn.rutgers.edu/student-support/tutoring-academic-support/learning-center>

Writing Center (tutoring and writing workshops)

Room 126, Conklin Hall
(973) 353-5847
nwc@rutgers.edu
<https://sasn.rutgers.edu/student-support/tutoring-academic-support/writing-center>

For Crisis and Concerns: The Campus Awareness Response and Education (CARE) Team works with students in crisis to develop a plan of support plan and address personal situations that might impact their academic performance. Connect with the CARE Team by using the following link: tinyurl.com/RUNCARE or emailing careteam@rutgers.edu.

For Psychological Support (Stress, Mood, Family Issues, Substance Use concerns and other personal challenges): The Rutgers University-Newark Counseling Center provides individual therapy and support groups for students dealing with psychological issues. To schedule an appointment, email counseling@newark.rutgers.edu or call (973) 353-5805.

Additional support is available to any RU-N student through Uwill services:

- Umatch: Teletherapy with flexible scheduling, starting with a free account.
- Uhelp: Crisis support at 833-646-1526 (available 24/7/365).
- Urise: Wellness-based video collection with a free account.

Access Uwill@RUN at <https://my.rutgers.edu> using your netid. Services are confidential and free.

For emergencies, call 911 or Rutgers University Police Department at (973) 353-5111.